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by [Searofyr](#)

Summary

The Journal of Salyn Darovi, Champion of Sheogorath.
Nirn, Clockwork City, Artaeum 2E.

After sorting out trouble in Morrowind, former Vestige and life-long Tribunal critic Salyn gets roped into helping out in Clockwork City. Instead of finding more to complain about, he falls for its god.

Partially and loosely follows the events of ESO Clockwork City & Summerset.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Been a while.

My last journal fell victim to an experiment; I was messing around with those faulty portals I've been finding, and I tried to send Riakil some of my notes to see if he could read them in his timeline like he could that dragon break book that fell into my hands and that probably wasn't meant for my eyes or the eyes of this entire era either, but my calibration was off, and now it's lost somewhere. Riakil didn't get it, and it didn't come back here either. Oh well.

So, a fresh one.

I'm in Vvardenfell. And I have books to talk about. The Truth in Sequence. Yeah, I don't believe it either.

But since I've already gotten myself roped into stabilising the reign of Vivec of all people, might as well read this, since the alchemist who owns it isn't around, and I need to pass the waiting time somehow.

The Truth in Sequence volume 1 already sets the tone, being as insufferable as one would expect.

Really, Deldrise Morvayn, "minds such as ours cannot bear the ordered unsequence"? Try working with someone with actual power, say, a Daedric Prince of Madness, and you'll quickly learn to bear all *kinds* of unsequences, and you'll get a good hard look at your mind while you're at it. Of course you might break in the process. To each their own.

...

"Alas, they heeded the council of Lorkhan and forgot the face of Anu. They thought themselves distinct and whole."

Oh shut up, Lorkhan did good work, and while we might not be whole if we're being honest, only an idiot would deny that we're distinct.

...

"And so, many hands assembled the world, each with separate intention and selfish purpose."

And where's the flaw in that? I'll defend my separate intentions and selfish purposes to the death; anything else might as well be that Padomaic "absence of value [...], lack [...], ghost that vanishes at first light" that you're lamenting about people following.

...

"His heart is oiled and calibrated, pumping dark truth as blood."

See, *this* I can work with. This is an intriguing image. Dark truth as blood is just the kind of thing I'm after.

Cut out the whole pious perfection and machine talk, and we're getting to something that could hold my interest. But then how could one expect that much from a "Fourth Tourbillon"?"

Chapter End Notes

I'm a moody writer with a bad habit of getting rid of accounts and works, do excuse me. I do still like this in its edited incarnation after all, so I'm putting it back up, cause why not?

Chapter 2

Notes on another of these:

The Truth in Sequence: Volume 5

Taken from the sermons of Deldrise Morvayn, Fourth Tourbillon to the Mainspring Ever-Wound.

[...] **“The Daedra can be banished in thought, but NM must be sundered on Nirn. It is the welded knot at the center of Anu that must be untied. The God-Puzzle. The Mainspring Ever-Wound remains silent on this point. And where there is silence, there is great wisdom.”**
[...]

I’m not so convinced of the wisdom of untying welded knots at the center of Anu, much as I like to test limits.

But this one part is interesting:

“The Daedra can be banished in thought,”

The Daedra can be banished in thought.

I have to do further research on this, this intrigues me now.

Am I really seriously engaging with Clockwork apostle scripture? Must have gotten a few too many knocks on the head or zaps by constructs in all those Dwemer ruins.

Chapter 3

“The Truth in Sequence: Volume 2” - A Constructive Book Critique by Salyn Darovi

In sequence, let me first get the obvious out of the way and suggest to the ‘Fourth Tourbillon’ to turn back into one of our golden-skinned ancestors if he hates creation, life, self, and freedom so much. For a Dunmer, this is shameful. Have some pride. (Although he would probably scoff at the idea.)

Needless to say, the entire argument posed here is nonsense.

Second in the sequence:

This volume lacks even an intriguing image or thought. The blood metaphor is repeated from the first volume, but done in a less effective way, a shallow echo, no more. No hidden truths reaching out in half-sentences either. This entire thing seems like a low effort work as second volumes of anything often are.

Perhaps the author was afraid that too much thought and originality might come across as too Padomaic, and that someone could accuse his gear of having been pried away from his pinion, or his wheel chain of having been loosened.

Third:

‘Give yourself to the pursuit of unity, for in the end, you cannot do otherwise.’

Want to take a bet on that?

Chapter 4

It's not just one but two Telvanni towers now that have had "The Truth in Sequence: Volume 2" lying around. Not what I would have expected to be a Great House favourite.

On another note:

Came here out of curiosity and for magic, but instead I'm freeing assorted slaves who approach me for help. Not what I would have expected either.

Perhaps my reputation for some things I helped do is starting to overshadow the association with my House. Or perhaps Telvanni slaves simply don't know and aren't concerned with what goes on outside the towers, and will approach anyone that looks unfamiliar. Yeah, it's probably that.

In any case, I'd better not mention this at family functions. The eccentric and irresponsible wandering sorcerer is a better look.

Some thoughts on House Telvanni

The delightful Mistress Dratha asked me for help dragging a Dremora over from Coldharbour for her. Good choice on her part; this I can do. Personal specialty, if you will. More often than not, the Telvanni will know who to ask for important business.

I would have considered a different one, tried to get a better deal, but she was in a hurry to get this done, and she's a capable grown woman with an almost exact idea of what she's doing, so it was her choice.

I'll add some personal judgment: She exemplifies House Telvanni at its best. She will do whatever it takes to achieve her goal, without regard for the cost, and she'll succeed. But her goal is a higher one, and the cost is for her to bear. That's a nobility of spirit I can't say I have.

She's also wise, determined, and will not be deterred, say by a well-meaning fool who might tempt her to falter if she gave the doubts too much room.

I'm thoroughly charmed.

She said we won't meet again after this, for obvious reasons I might add. Pity. Here's someone I wouldn't have minded seeing again.

As if to cure me of such thoughts, I still have other business with this House in Sadrith Mora, and here I'm reminded of why usually nobody can stand them. Everyone here is unrepentantly awful, even the former Argonian slaves rising in their ranks. I'm just finishing this up to help free this one Argonian fellow who seems to have a kind heart and who really deserves better. Then good riddance.

I did have a guard express his respect for my House though, that was unexpected and nice in this territory. To keep up my mood I'll try not to think too hard on it being probably thanks to our close trade relationship.

I need a break from all this sometime soon.

Chapter 6

For something else: I still can't figure out what Riakil meant exactly in that vision he sent me earlier. Something to do with Red Mountain. And it isn't this incident here, cause we fixed that. And he says I'll soon have something to lose that's more than Morrowind, and that this time it was 'only' Morrowind. 'Only' in quotation marks; that's odd in itself. I love Morrowind.

“‘There’ is when the time comes. ‘There’ is the consequence.” What in Oblivion, Riakil? Fucking mystics. As if dealing with Vivec wasn't enough.

But I do love this crazy little mer; I hope he made it to wherever he was heading and is doing well.

On a sidenote to think about later, I know he was always all about Lorkhan, but in that vision they seemed quite a bit closer and more in tune than I'd have expected. Wonder what that's all about. Wonder if he knows.

Now, rest. I really need rest.

Sorting some thoughts.

It feels good to have saved Morrowind, even if it means fortifying Vivec's rule. But I suppose I can live with him for now. He can be alright in small doses. As long as I stay away from his writings, which is hard to do since he keeps quoting himself.

Something that doesn't let go of me. That section of Clockwork City I was in. Fascinating. And unpretentious. You can tell there's no vanity going into that, unlike in absolutely everything Vivec's ever done, made, said, written.

And it's in trouble, isn't it?

No, no, what am I thinking?

Chapter 8

Can someone tell me why, after all this, I'm meeting a *Telvanni* mage in the *Tribunal Temple* to discuss *Clockwork City*?

Last I checked I was sober.

This is stupid. This is incredibly stupid.

But I'm intrigued, and that's the death of reason, so help me.

Clockwork City.

Made it in after a (still entertaining) diversion.

Well by Oblivion, this is actually stunning. This wasn't the plan at all.

As for my travel companion – it seems House Telvanni members are reliably either my favourite or my least favourite people. Usually it's the latter. This one's making it into the former category.

Divayth is capable of deeper thought than your average career-obsessed mushroom dweller, and he uses that capability to actually do it.

Insightful, ancient, very entertaining to travel with. I'll be more than happy to partner up for more ventures. And the way he treats me as someone worthy of collaboration on about the same level is flattering, I'll say. (I'm not fool enough to think we're equal; ask me again in a few thousand years, but not now. All the more appreciated.) All in all, I quite adore the man. He'd be flattered to read that, I'm sure, and probably find it an entirely natural response.

This is a disconcerting amount of positivity, all the more given the venture. Something's wrong with me. Some gears loose. Words out of sequence. Oil flow diverted.

Chapter 10

Damn. It really is beautiful.

A terrible idea by a false god, but beautiful.

I want to know how it works.

And due to circumstances, I'm currently trying to get citizenship for it.

Chapter 11

Stunning.

What am I supposed to do with this fact?

Clockwork City sponsorship acquired.

Do I have anything positive to say about the experience?

Perhaps this: In Clockwork City, when you uncover the extortion and unceremonious dumping of potential immigrants into a mess of a factory, in the inevitable slums, leaving them to die there, authorities are grateful and reward you with citizenship. Wouldn't have that everywhere.

I liked the skeevaton. I want one. I wonder if one could get a netch variant functional. A netchaton? Floating around with its little metallic tentacles?

My valued associate Divayth found me shortly after and told me something's wrong with Sotha Sil, likely due to Daedric causes, and we should investigate.

I'm reluctantly interested.

I met Vivec while something was wrong with *him* due to Daedric causes. I'm going to venture the guess that he made a lot more sense in that state than when he's well.

But Divayth likes Sotha Sil, and *he* has his head on straight, and I find myself at least intrigued by the work I see, so perhaps there might be something worth my attention there.

Chapter 13

So. The Truth in Sequence: Volume 9.

This one's different from the others. This is the first one I find recognition in, something like-minded. Did the same person really write this? Or perhaps they did, but bothered to listen more closely for this one.

Perhaps, perhaps.

Sheogorath's lie, yeah? The other ones talk of Lorkhan's lie, but that's all the same; call it madman's instinct. The interesting part about this volume is that the philosophy isn't far removed from the "lie" at all, may you name it Lorkhan's or Sheogorath's.

And with that being the case, I could work with this.

Theoretically.

Chapter 14

For all that this fake Sotha Sil was an impostor and a shadow and spouting the kind of authoritarian nonsense I'd expect from the Tribunal (but not necessarily from this one anymore, verdict still pending), he *was* awfully pretty.

To do now: Prevent a cataclysm and all our deaths, and find the real one.

Now, if the real one has his head on straighter, which certain hints suggest, and if he's as pretty as this forgery...

I mean to say, we must save the world at once. Yeah, yeah.

You'll have to excuse me; after enough threats to the world, a certain fatigue sets in. And thoughts of shifting priorities creep in. Only natural.

Chapter 15

Someone made a ridiculously dangerous pact with Daedric Princes to become the next ruler of Clockwork City and replace Sotha Sil. That and the way he talked pissed me off, so I killed him. When the real Sil is back, he shouldn't have to deal with this dangerous rubbish.

I'm already in too deep, aren't I, and I don't even know in what.

Well, next for some lighter fare, I get to track down some talking Daedric crows, and I'd have to be very mistaken if these weren't my old friends from Stonefalls.

Chapter 16

Before I deal with crows, I need a night off. So I'm in...something of a tavern. The atmosphere is a bit too professional for my liking, but they're unlikely to be installing corner clubs in Clockwork City anytime soon, so I make do with what there is.

There is an "Auditory Stimulator". A factotum that for the past hour or so has made countless attempts at playing "Chim-el Adabal" on a flute, failed each time, and kept relentlessly starting over after a few notes.

I've made a decision for my future actions in this conflict. Because yes, Daedric plots to take over the world are bad and to be disrupted each tedious time it takes, but there'll be more to decide before this is over, I'm sure. There always is.

Here are the facts:

- The authoritarian shadow was a fake, and Divayth found his behaviour unusual, and Divayth would know. Besides, he's smart and has mostly good opinions, and he wouldn't befriend a pompous dictator.

- There've been a lot of hints at a different view on Sil's part. I'd just have to hear it from the man himself, but alas, he's currently missing.

- This factotum. If this is allowed, then I can't possibly believe Sil values perfection and sterility as much as his followers would like one to believe. This factotum has convinced me for now to put some trust in the creator and overseer of this madhouse, and work on his side. Here it is for the record. Sil, if we get you out of wherever you are alive, and the city's still standing at the end of all this, you'd better give this creature a raise.

How I feel about this allegiance that's been creeping up on me? Ask me later. I'm actually too sober for this.

I wonder if Divayth knows how to procure some sujamma around here. I bet he does.

Heading: Clockwork City status report and assessments.

Subject: Crows. Sub-heading: Extraneous facts to introduce status report.

Both the Knave of Rooks and the Duke of Crows recognised me from Crow's Wood, very good that. Nothing like familiar ground in bizarre situations.

Assorted crow business is taken care of. I like these little fellows.

Naturally, it all gets more complicated from here.

Subject: Clockwork City policies. Sub-heading: Continuing incongruities between master and servants observed.

While Varuni will insist to the point of wilful ignorance that no Daedric artefacts would ever make it into the city, and while libraries are forbidden from carrying literature on Daedra, Sotha Sil himself has made a very mysterious pact with a number of Daedric Princes in the past.

And while order is everything in this place, it is a routine procedure for the most devout followers and the most passionless factotums to tap into a corpse's brain and interview him. As I just did.

I've never been a student of necromancy, although some ignorant elements like to link it to the school of conjuration. But this was certainly an interesting experience. Imagine if one took that medical factotum and its devices down to Tamriel into the tombs of the great men and women in history; imagine the revised histories we would get to write... Not going to happen, I know. But just imagine.

Subject: Immediate plans.

For now, we have to get that stupid Daedric key back and to save the owner of this place, who is looking more and more not to be so stiff and self-righteous at all.

Subject: Emotional response. Accessing idea centre. Data incomplete. Accessing emotional core. Data incomplete. Accessing mood regulation centre. Overlaying data from idea centre and emotional core. Filtering data.

I'm starting to think I want to save him just so I can have a lengthy conversation with him. (And oh he'll owe me that after all the things I'm going through here for his sake.)

Chapter 18

Sil, whoever you are in the end, why'd you have to make this place so pretty? By now I care about saving it.

Chapter 19

I got myself involved in digging around a suspicious facility, but I don't know enough yet.

No, this entry is only to note that I'm pleased to discover in the Clockwork City archives, among all the pious scripture and technical treatises, "The Sultry Argonian Bard, Vol. 1".

So this place hasn't turned everyone completely into machines yet. Good to know.

Chapter 20

I'm supposed to be investigating, but I found another interesting piece of literature in this archive, scripture this time, not more racy texts about Argonians or beautiful Morrowind.

Another worthwhile Truth in sequence volume, in fact.

And so it is written in *The Truth in Sequence: Volume 7. Taken from the sermons of Deldrise Morvayn, Fourth Tourbillon to the Mainspring Everwound*:

“But what profits a man or mer to gaze deep into a single future? The aims of mortals are narrow, far too narrow! To move forward is to ignore infinite angles in favor of one.”

This is the kind of thing I'm interested in myself. I must speak to this mer. The boss, I mean, not the Tourbillon.

After I find him, that is. Reason enough to finish up here and get going, I know. Oh but I suspect another idiotic conspiracy here, and I can't fully express my fatigue with those things. There's always *something*.

Well, on with it, I guess.

Bleak thoughts. Bear with me, paper.

Well, that was most likely not how this facility was supposed to run.

And I'm not proud of the decision I made on the spot.

I won't say anything more. Let's keep it under wraps for now. I'll bring it up to the boss when I get him out of wherever he is. Let him figure something out. Maybe he'll get mad that I left it up for now, figuring the people have to eat, maybe he'll get it. In any case he has to pay attention.

This is why you don't give people like us all the power. Things get lost between tinkering and research. I get it. That's the chilling part, except for what I've witnessed just now, but I've witnessed a lot in my life. No. I get it. I'm just like that. That could have easily happened to me, too, except I don't have divine powers.

This is why he's not a god, divine powers or no. But you know what the other chilling thing is? I've come to care for this fine work and its people enough not to step in when the apprentice suggested continuing for now. I've made other decisions before that I'm not proud of, but it's been a long time since I've done something like this and I've felt helpless enough to see no other recourse at the time.

Does he feel the same?

And do I just keep writing to clear my conscience and blame the circumstances? Well, of course the circumstances are wrong. But I can see something behind them that may make it worth it, from a certain angle. And perhaps doing this utterly mad work takes compromise. I've fought and killed against all odds. This is *creating* against all odds. (And also killing, it turns out.)

I really want to talk this out. And I can't talk to anyone here.

Does he feel the same as this, too?

We should talk. Time to meet those crows and walk into Oblivion again.

All in the still lingering hope that somewhere at the end of this, something waits that is worth it. Because if not, all this would just be too depressing.

Chapter 22

A brief one, to augment mere thoughts with words on paper.

I've walked through the Evergloom with Daedric crows as my guides, and I'm back to the City, the relevant part. I'll take down Sil's shadow and rescue the man himself, hopefully intact; the odds are laughable, and it's come to where I'm doing this not as a favour to anyone else but because I want to.

Everything about this is utter madness, and this is where it has to be for the future to change.

Sheogorath, I know you're my patron and you watch anyway, but I could use some help here, so I explicitly call on you and your powers and your element, which has been with me as a steady companion throughout this whole venture.

Do your worst.

I want a happy outcome, and should we succeed, I promise I won't make it boring. (More ill-advised words have never been written.)

Chapter 23

Made it. Rescued Sil, got rescued by Divayth in turn when things threatened to turn against me at the last moment. Unwelcome Daedric Princes all banished.

Somewhat obviously, met Sil, and he's alive, thank Sheogorath.

Speaking of.

Speaking of.

Damn it all, this is ridiculous. I know I was setting myself up for the price to pay to be anything at all, but this is unfair. Surely entertaining, but unfair.

No. No, not yet. Not yet. Time to think. Time to think a lot.

Or perhaps, time not to think. I can't decide.

First, get myself in a presentable state after all this. Sleep won't happen anyway. Then... I don't know.

No, I do know. I've invoked madness, I can't hide behind such a pedestrian thing as thinking.

I'll be back.

Chapter 24

Sil was waiting for me in the auditorium. Quiet, undictatorial, collected, beautiful.

Knew I'd try to find him, huh. Convenient. But I got the element of surprise in the end.

He offered to repay the favour I'd done him, and said I could choose a boon. "Ask, and you shall have it," he said.

That made me pause and have to collect myself, because I knew what I had to do. "Anything?" I asked. "Are you sure?"

"You could ask for power," he said. "Many do. And rarely, there is altruism in the requests." As if merely reciting the expected.

"Well, I've got no use for more power at the moment, and that'd be a waste anyway. But I'm not entirely altruistic after all. You're sure, yeah?"

From the look on his face, this seems to be where the conversation went off the expected track. Maybe he liked that, cause he told me to continue.

So with the clause that he could say no, I asked him out.

I know. Protocol is turning in its grave.

The answer took a long time, a long terrible silence, and then he gave me the tiniest smile and agreed.

He agreed.

He wants to talk to me and Divayth first anyway in private about some important business, and then we can take more time to get drinks and talk.

I'm too stunned for a proper response and for sufficient thanks to my patron, but it's implied.

By the way, my earlier statement about this price being unfair, I'll retract that, except should this actually work out, it'd still be unfair, but only in that I don't actually deserve this, but I'll take it with the utmost gratitude.

Now make this work. Make this work. Am I messing up the whole world fate with this or by keeping him away from his work? Doesn't matter.

Fuck.

Two conversations

I went to fetch Divayth for our meeting with Sil. He was in a melancholy mood, spoke of professional jealousies and complications to friendships (though he said 'rival'), and since he was alone, and I like the man and his judgment, I spilled what I'd done.

"I thought you'd come around," he said, "though not quite as much."

"That was a surprise for me, too," I said.

"Well, at least I can't accuse you of treating him like a god." He got more serious than usual.

"That's good. I was banking on that when I brought you here; you're not the type. That's what he needs around him, amid all those doe-eyed fanatics and fools. If you can manage to keep it that way, you have my blessing, for what that's worth."

"I can manage," I said, "cause he is no god by my standards. He's just, well. Damn."

"And you obviously mean it, too." A thin smile.

I returned the smile, but then bleak matters entered my mind again. "Might not even come to anything. He might get mad at me for a thing."

Divayth raised an eyebrow.

"Had to make a decision on a place I visited. I didn't step in with what was happening; maybe I should have. Probably should have. I don't know what he'll think of that."

"That was before you entered the portal to the Evergloom?"

"Yeah."

"Then it would be the Wellspring. You left it up?"

"You knew?" I asked superfluously. Of course he'd know.

Consequently, he didn't even bother to answer that one and moved right ahead. "You plan on telling him?"

"Of course."

"Good. Someone has to, so you do it. Go ahead, clear it up. You might be surprised. And continue like this. It'll be good if someone who isn't a sycophant keeps his eyes open for him."

"If I even get the chance to continue anything."

He gave a sigh between patience and impatience. "He won't rip your head off. Unlike many of his followers, he's got the rare ability to think."

I nodded slowly, trying to be convinced.

"Besides, I told you, didn't I? He doesn't stray from decisions once made. Although this is a new one. Still, it wouldn't surprise me if he had it all laid out in his head already. Now go ahead, don't be moping around here. I'll follow in a bit."

So I went to the meeting spot. Sil was waiting already, again.

I told him Divayth would be joining us in a bit, and I had to get something else off my chest first, and he'd told me to go ahead.

If it's from Divayth, it seems he'll relax and accept that there's a point, so he said let's talk then, and I spilled the whole Wellspring matter, what went on there, what I'd done or rather not done, all the concerns and thoughts that had been plaguing me.

He listened and thought and processed, and the wait was forever, again. It's maddening. But I don't want to interrupt him till he's done with his thoughts. Seems wrong, somehow.

"And did Divayth have anything to say about this?" he asked at last.

So I relayed all of that to him, too.

He nodded, and then he smiled. It's ridiculous what that smile does to me already.

"You did well under the circumstances. Divayth was right. We'll look into this tomorrow. I'll want your opinion."

I was stunned into silence. I may have muttered a thanks. He smiled again.

"So," I said at last, "later today. Are we still doing this, or..."

"If you want."

"Of course I want."

He seemed to relax. "Curious," he said. "You were only supposed to save me, or not, and leave. Instead, you may understand me. I wonder, am I being hasty?"

"Sometimes you have to be," I said. "If it helps, I've been thinking the same thing."

Chapter 26

From what Divayth had said earlier, and what he said again in Sil's presence after we were all gathered at the memorial, it sounded as if he was leaving his friend in my care.

As it turns out, neither expects to see the other again.

There's a tragedy in that, but I'll do my utmost best to fulfil what I'm entrusted with and be worthy of it.

Funny. Two artificial sunset or so ago I still wondered if what I'd find here would be worth it to me or not. Now, I know what I've found to be the most precious thing there could be.

We talked all night after Divayth left.

First in the memorial until dark. Then when I reminded Sil I'm more mortal than him with all that entails, we went to one of his rooms, a really secluded one. Surely also away from prying ears. Yet the earlier conversation didn't take place here. I'll take the signal for what I believe it is.

He suggested leaving the drinks until tomorrow night, and I agreed; this was the kind of conversation to have while sober.

I will point out at this time that I don't often have the long and deep conversations while sober. But then, I don't normally sincerely want to get to know someone, and even less to be known.

I told him that straight since I don't trust myself with giving meaningful signals that make my feelings and intentions clear, even to an almost omniscient person. I'm not good enough with people for that. He smiled, and I'm sure he understood.

We're like cats or something, circling around each other, getting steadily closer and leaving cryptic gifts to show intent.

Actually that doesn't sound like cats at all now that I think about it; two cats interested in each other wouldn't spend till morning talking existential philosophy and making future plans.

Maybe nature isn't for me, and I should learn clockwork metaphors instead.

This is getting long, and sleep threatens to overcome me. Sil's reading something for now; I've got the sleeping cot. (This will need additions of the comfortable variety if I'm to move in. And I'm to move in.)

But some remarkable points. I'll leave all the gushing about him for later, although that's also important, and he's nothing if not remarkable.

But.

I confessed to invoking Sheogorath and his powers and making promises of the sort of not making things boring if he gave us a happy outcome. This mer deals with Daedra on an equal basis; he deserves to know this, and probably has a better idea of what I did there than I did. He seemed both surprised and not, and accepted it.

Remarkable, see?

He said I had taken care of his city while he couldn't and been more loyal in practice than most believers, and I made decisions on my own that he could live with and that mostly ran in the same direction as his and that otherwise were interesting. So he suggested I stay and continue doing just that as someone associated with him but outside of the regular command structure. Just with him around, now that that last situation is dealt with.

I almost accepted but pointed out that now my heart was in the balance and I had to heed that. He smiled and said that was already accounted for.

He feels trapped by certainty, but I throw it off, and he likes it. But he's already adjusting and seeing things and planning me into his life after some mutual reassurances that he can and he wants to and he should.

Small things, too. It's fascinating to watch unfold. He'll start with a gesture, like that time at the memorial still, under the artificial night sky. He touches my cheek, we remain that way, then his eyes take on a far-off look, then he slowly withdraws his hand and says he also sees something different. He waits in place again, his gaze far away once more, then he's decided and lets his hand drop entirely and looks at me as if waiting. Getting over my hesitation and my mind informing me I have no idea what I'm doing and if this is alright, I brush over his cheek instead and run my fingers through his hair. He smiles and closes his eyes. Apparently the new future has met his approval.

This is now twice as long, and I'm gushing about him after all. I'm closing this journal now. I'm too tired for words. Tomorrow will be busy. Tomorrow will be tomorrow. There is a tomorrow. There'll be more tomorrows like that. I'm still stunned. Not stunned enough to stop writing, apparently. Goodnight now.

Today so far

I'd mostly forgotten to eat yesterday. When you wake up starving, even that tasteless paste is alright. But only then. I brought it up to Sil, of course in line with today's planned expedition, and he sighed and said, "You all really care so much about that?"

I said yes. I also said I was a decent cook if I had the chance. He sighed again.

I pointed out people will go to war over spices and find it a worthwhile cause.

"Perhaps some things are lost causes. I'll look into it," he said, and that means it'll get solved at some point. I like that. He doesn't make promises he won't keep; if he doesn't want to do something, he'll just refuse. It's relaxing. I don't have to wonder. Why are people in the city always talking about him being confusing? He's one of the most clear-spoken people I've ever met.

So we went down to the Wellspring. By "went" I mean "he made us appear there". I made a joke about that and the conveniences of royalty, but then I saw the reaction of the people there, and the getting swarmed, and I get it now. I don't think I've witnessed anything like that before. And I've stood with kings, and even the other two Tribunal members. Funny. The ones who want so much more to be gods. But they're always around; this one isn't, especially with recent circumstances.

This is going to be strenuous in the long run, I know, but worth it.

Anyway, food production is back on the boss's project desk.

Tonight we're taking off, for as much as "off" means when we're talking metaphysics and city matters non-stop and it's fantastic, but I insisted he needed to relax and so did I.

I'm moving some of my things over since I'm impulsive and decided, and he doesn't believe in artificially postponing already-decided matters.

While I'm doing that, I'm also fetching the last sujamma bottles Divayth left with me. I never found out where he got them, beyond hints I didn't follow up on so far, but he always knew, and we ended quite a few days over the stuff while he was here and I was trying to make sense of this city and its creator and my own thoughts about it all and myself, and apparently in retrospect, so was he in his own way.

He gave me a supply at some point, saying I'd need it with how this was all unfolding.

Sil was amused and commented on how we'll always find ways to smuggle this stuff into the city, and I agreed. I asked him when he'd last had any. I forgot what year he named, but one too long ago.

"So would you say this would be an addition to the city that would be widely welcomed?" he

asked.

I grinned. “Do I even need to answer that?”

“You won’t lie about the profane matters in order to look better to me. I like that. You would be surprised how often I’ve heard apologies and promises of self-improvement.”

“You’re gorgeous,” I said, because that felt like the most appropriate response at that moment.

That split second of surprise and that smile will be burned into my heart for all time.

“So,” I glanced at the bottles. “Tonight, you want to test if you can inflict this on your populace?”

He was still smiling. “If you say so.”

Evening intermediate status report

This experiment is going very well. The combination of beautiful imposter god and sujamma is highly successful and to be recommended, but look for your own imposter god for trying this out cause this one's mine now.

We talked art and I remembered something I'd written down while I was here trying to find him, so I dug it out, and announced that this was a work of art created by his creations, freshly at my request, and while I couldn't know then that it'd be relevant so soon, I must now read it to him; a love poem for the ages, and Vivec's got nothing on this, but he'll understand because it's an honour to be surpassed by this heart-rending genius. Talking, of course, about "Love Poem LT0782".

[factotum poetry follows]

I think it's a success.

(He won't stop laughing, and that is a success.)

(For fuck's sake this man is beautiful; I'll end up writing my own bad poetry in time if I don't watch myself.)

This is it.

So he sleeps sometimes. It's ridiculous how nervous I was just sleeping next to someone, just that. He looked pleased enough at that, so that's good.

This thing is proceeding by its own rules, and by our own rules, and they can be a challenge to figure out.

This morning, we thought we'd look at the city some for things that need work, but that meant a lot of attention again. Superficially Sil looked his calm and regal self, but I'm getting to know the tells. Midway, he decided he's teaching me about the basics of how things are run now so I'll be able to make decisions effectively when I'm on my own. So in a matter of moments, we were in one of his private work rooms.

He lets me see the erratic side and the moods and trusts me to back him up. I'm proud of that, I have to say.

So I learned a lot about city functions, and I do mean a lot, and by the end my head was feeling like static overload like when I overdo it on the lightning spells, and we've still only scratched the surface. I love this.

When he had to back up in his explanations more and more often and I jumped to wrong conclusions frequently, he looked at me for a moment and then quit for today and got into general talk. Perceptive after all. People don't know a thing about him. Though maybe tomorrow I should actually say when it's getting too much. That'd probably be helpful. Yeah.

Out of the blue he said I could travel when and where I wanted, I wasn't bound by anything. And that while I still throw his calculations off, he gets glimpses, and I'm most effective in what I do in the version in which he gives me most liberties in every way, and that path has the chance of the best outcome.

When he talks about the future or futures like that, I always feel like I have to think very well about how I respond, but perhaps that's going about it wrong. He tilted his head and waited, and there was a tension in his fingers.

The direct response then. I stumbled across my words a few times trying to accept the terms and expressing gratitude but not the reverence of a follower or employee because I'm not, and then I said, "Don't worry. Just because you give me freedom doesn't mean I won't impose rules on myself."

"I know," he said. He sat closer. Still a rare move from him. "Still you hesitate."

There's a particular feeling when you're getting sucked into the vortex of someone else's portal spell, even if it's one you requested yourself, and you lose all sense of orientation and the world spins and loses coherence even while you know where this is going. That's what this was.

Well, if hesitation was not wanted, then I should stop, and yet I thought I ought to explain it. That

combination made the outcome rather direct.

“This isn’t for my sake,” I said. “I love you. And I want you. I don’t care about the source, I don’t care about anything. I’ve never been able to love anyone, but I know what this is, and this is it. So don’t worry about me. But for you, see...”

That smile. Impossible. But he just let me continue, so I did.

“You talk about the future or the futures, and while I love what’s happening, well – you don’t put a lot of stock in choices, and I want to make sure you want this and aren’t just acting indebted to some future you saw.”

There was a twitch of a different kind of smile around his lips. “It seems that just because I choose a future does not mean I don’t have to mention it.”

I grinned. “We’re both not the best at explaining ourselves, are we? And neither of us usually has to. Indulge me, just a bit.”

He reached over, laid his hand on my shoulder and let it trail down my arm. “As I said earlier, I saw different possibilities. They are always uncertain and riddled with dark spots when they include you. But I knew what would happen if I chose you and let you into my life. I liked it the best, and so I chose you. Rather selfishly so, in fact. And I feel happening what I knew would happen, and don’t regret my choice. Does this reassure you?”

I couldn’t stop smiling. “It does.”

His voice got quieter. “Then let me ask you two more things.” Still always composed and organised. How does he do this? “Will you let me have this, then?”

He knows how to make my heart stop and melt steel and keep that vortex sensation always on the horizon to threaten swallowing up all reason. “You get everything,” I said. “I love you, and you get absolutely everything.”

His smile was too much. He leaned in closer. “And even if you’re free to go, will you stay with me?”

“Of course I will,” I said, and I barely had a voice. “You’ve got me. You’ve got all of me. This is it.”

He leaned in to kiss me, and all was over. I’m lost.

A commitment

He ran his hand through my hair and rested it at the back of my neck. “In the despair of certainty, chaos arrived, and I invited him in, and fell in love. But chaos turned out to be more chivalrous than he’d advertised. And so instead of replacing despair with an old fear, there may be hope.”

I kissed him again, and he held me close.

“There’ll be something to talk about, won’t there?” I asked at last.

“If you want.”

“I want. Whatever it is, it’s my problem now.”

He smiled faintly. “I wonder...” His voice trailed off.

“Let me ask you something then,” I said. “Whatever it’ll end up being, I’m guessing it’ll take drastic measures. Will you allow them?”

His fingertips wandered across my back in patterns. “Of course you have your suspicions already.”

“I do. The things you say... And your security system was chatty.”

“I see. I’ll tell you about it then, at another time.” He got that distant look, then focused on me again. “Know that you have my faith in this.” He cupped my cheek in his hand, and I knew what he meant and smiled.

“I’ll never disappoint you,” I said. “Never. Not in this.”

He nodded slightly against the pillow, as if accepting a simple truth he knows to stand firm. “You won’t. Then know, too, that you have my faith in all other matters, too. I know whose champion you are. And you are, don’t doubt that. I’ve invited it, and you, knowing who you are. Even though, or because, your role for Nirn continues to elude me.” He fell silent, then lowered his voice. “May I be honest?”

He’s honest to me as a matter of course. This question means further information with the potential to disappoint. I could never refuse him. “Always.” I brushed his lips with a kiss. “Always.” I stayed close, even though no one could hear us here anyway.

He nodded. “Any outcome is better than what certainty dictates. Don’t speak about this.”

“I won’t,” I said, while my heart was being torn up.

“Do what you’d like. You’ll want to. I know you now. I won’t withdraw my support.”

I accepted, and kissed him again, and the conversation was over for the day. Everything else has just begun.

There’s nothing as binding as complete trust and complete freedom to act.

Some scripture assembled for my love

[A handwritten note placed on Sotha Sil's desk]

From *Sixteen Accords of Madness*, v. IX, *Vaermina's Tale*:

“And thus did Sheogorath teach Vaernima [sic] that without madness, there are no dreams, and no creation.”

From *The Truth in Sequence*, Taken from the sermons of Deldrise Morvayn, *Fourth Tourbillon of the Mainspring Ever-Wound*, Volume 4:

“For the Mainspring Ever-Wound is the Father of Curiosity, and curiosity is the joyful destroyer. Only in sundering can things be made whole. Only the disassembled engine can be scrubbed and made clean. So, smash the old machines! Topple your mind's idols! And from the wreckage, assemble new truths—flawless and water-tight.”

You're in good hands; I'll make sure of that.

Chapter 32

He's killing me.

I'm dead.

This entry's being written by a wraith.

Scheduling

We're getting a work routine going, usually with Sil tinkering indoors or planning the great destiny of Nirn-Ensuing or some new fabricant type (I'm really partial to that wiry jumpy walking lizardlike type, slimmer than a clannfear, cuter too, they call them verminous fabricants, but I don't care, if there was a tame version of that, that thing'd never leave my side), and me out either trying to help out directly or noting down issues and keeping my eyes open for him. Basically what Divayth envisioned in our conversation that day. His word still holds sway here.

Or we both stay in and I get lessons. Those are the best days.

At some point we're going to have to address Summerset, cause there's a situation brewing there, but he wants me settled here first, and says there's still enough time.

When I go out, some people are so glad someone in touch with the boss is helping, they're extremely cooperative. Others, not so much. Some insist on rank and procedures and won't accept a thing. I brought it up to Sil, and he sighed and said he thought it would just settle itself with his implicit endorsement, but he'll have to address it after all. I love how annoyed he gets when he has to make official announcements.

Then there are the cases in which I've got no idea what I'm doing and it's either too complex for a gut decision or I wonder if Sil will have a particular stake in it; then I take it back to him. Sometimes to the disappointment of someone in charge who thought he could dupe the outsider into making some decision in his favour. (I've fallen for those, too. Can't be vigilant every moment.)

In the evenings I got the great concession of being told to get him out of his work if he forgets, unless he's working on some grand thing that shouldn't be interrupted. But in emergencies that's fine, too.

I asked him, "What if the emergency is that I need you because I love you so much?"

His eyes sparked with a smile and then focused on nothing, far away.

"Are you *calculating* what the best outcome is?"

He turned back to the present and smiled. "I am. And yes, that is an emergency, too."

"Now I want to see what you've seen."

"You will. It's your declarations of emergency state, after all."

"Oh, fuck." I pulled him close for a kiss and couldn't let go. "You'll be the death of me, you will."

"See, he said, "it's already paying off."

Chapter 34

So, my “status” has been officially confirmed in a few ways.

For one, Sil made an announcement that I’ve done great services for the City (which he kept vague), and that – though outside the usual hierarchies – I work for him and speak in his name now in most issues, etc. This’ll get me the resentment of some, of course, but hopefully the ability to get some work done here.

You can also see the rumours growing by the second. That part is rather funny.

There’ve also been letters to Almalexia and Vivec, the latter longer than the former, both sent via crow fabricant prototypes sent through portals.

He let me read while he was writing them.

Both letters explain that the threat to Clockwork City is over, that he’s safe and alive, and detail the next probable crisis. Both tell about my role in saving him and the city, and my current role with him and the city.

And in both he writes that he assumes their approval as they’ve each already named me their Hand and Champion respectively, and hopes that my agreeing to stay with him doesn’t inconvenience them too much.

A water-tight wall of passive-aggressive politeness and foregone conclusions. I love him, and I almost pity them.

So that’s that.

Except the letter to Vivec concludes:

“Lastly, brother, I regret having to inform you that my partner and your Champion has recently instructed my factotums to write love poetry, and judged the result superior to your own body of work. He said you would understand and that there is honour in being surpassed by such heart-rending genius. Here it is attached for your consideration.”

Family

Now I've done it, my life is officially a farce.

We've been invited over to visit Vivec, who sends his heartfelt congratulations and some flowery cryptic lines that I think translate to, since he can see I make Sil happy, I have his approval, and under a certain light I'm not a surprising choice after all this time.

Which is nice, of course. But if someone had told me, even a few weeks ago, that I'd be going on a friendly visit to *Vivec* for a sort of *family* reunion, I'd have shipped him off to my patron. And I'm about to ship myself off to my patron for wanting to accept the invitation.

But I've come to tolerate the guy while I was there and he was sick and would still indulge me with debates, and well, he knows what and who I am and still wants to approve purely for me being good for his brother? That means he must care for Sil, and then I can't refuse.

Also it's his brother. Sure, his brother in fake godhood following murder, but there are worse bases for family ties, let's be honest.

And finally, I think it'll be good for Sil to leave this city at least sometimes, at least briefly. And not just to the Psijics to another study for more work. Outside. Into the reality of Tamriel.

And he hasn't been doing that. And Vivec's letter had that note of "perhaps you'll accept the invitation this time".

You know, let's go.

We could extend it, too, get a place or two out in nature, maybe regular places, where nobody bothers us and no Apostles want to show off their homework... We can still think surrounded by mushrooms.

I talk about reconnecting with siblings, and don't consider my own case: I'm going to have to tell Miziah at some point, aren't I? That'll be interesting.

How do I even start that conversation? "Remember how you told me a while ago to find someone and settle down? Well..."

And she worships the Tribunal, too. For fuck's sake. I've been here long enough that my life looks normal to me already, but to my mainland sister? I'm going to need so much sujamma to get through that talk.

Chapter 36

Or how about this? “Hey, Miziah. So you know how I’ve never considered the members of the Tribunal to be divine? Well, consequently...”

This is impossible. How am I going to do this talk? This is going to be a disaster.

Of course Sil is just very amused.

And that makes everything better, damn it. I’m beyond hope.

Threat assessment

Sil and I finally had that talk, the threat assessment talk, the things he's trying to outrun or circumvent or pretend to accept. First the more simple and mundane ones, then going into the more abstract ones for as much as I'd get it right now. Wasn't easy for him, I could tell. Wasn't easy for me either, but that doesn't matter. So now I know what we're dealing with.

He kept putting his work first, as if as an obligation. Has to be ensured that the city runs on, those kinds of things. One time he actually said "My life is not a priority."

I said, "It is now." For obvious selfish reasons, but besides, there was that other conversation, the one that led to this, the one where he said anything's preferable to what's certain and framed it as a confession. You don't make confessions about exceptional work ethic.

He looked at me for a long time, and then smiled just a little. "If you say so."

He knows how to break my heart, really does. "I say so," I said. And in case he needed something more, "I insist. I need you, you know."

He was still for another moment, then inclined his head a bit. "Tell me more about your situation. In your words."

I'd told him the basics before, and he knew some by himself already, as he does. But he's been asking for my own thoughts and words a lot lately; apparently they differ quite a bit from calculations. Well, I'd sure hope so.

"Alright," I said, "here's the deal to my knowledge. When I got my soul back, there was a time of adjustment, and it could have gone in either direction, mortal or whatever the other thing was. You know I'm a conjurer, I work with Daedra, and I work with souls; I can more or less tell what's what. I'll tell you though, it's a bizarre feeling when it's on yourself.

"So part of the choice, it seemed, was on me. I was scared to die, but I was scared of the other way, too. You can't be around so many soul-shriven all the time and not get spooked and think that's going to be you. Unless you're one of those unfazed serene souls who can withstand anything. But I know what I'm like after a bad work day. And there's a reason I used to drink so much before I got here. Completely unrealistic. So I went to get a second opinion, and maybe an offer that sounded good."

He listened, and then nodded slightly. "Sheogorath."

"Yeah. He's been my patron since my youth; my mother used to worship Azura, I picked a different one for my own values. My father and sister were good Tribunal-fearing mer." I grinned. "Sister still is. Anyway. This wasn't sudden or out of desperation. And he made direct contact while I was involved with all that Molag Bal and war business, via the Mages Guild. I'll tell you the story another time.

"So, we talked, and I got the offer. Special position, I'd go with the immortality, but tweaked a little, more stable and we can't have it that I radiate Molag Bal's influence, although that would be funny, too, but not funny enough in the long run. I got in some clauses. For one thing, if something

does kill me, cause there's no one that can't be killed somehow, or if I get tired of life in Tamriel, I can always come home to the Isles, and stay there. Get a little house, do my thing. Or if my soul does decay – unlikely, that was more my own fear, but I wanted it in there – or I just plain really want to die, I can die and it'll be like any mortal.”

“In return, you're his champion.”

“Sort of. I don't have any special trinkets from him, and no tasks. He says he's not setting me on the small stuff, and I work for him anyway. And that I wouldn't have any fun if I didn't have to figure things out by myself and he just gave me all the toys. And he expects more from just setting me loose in the world and seeing what'll happen than from giving me work instructions.”

“A bit like me.”

I grinned. “A bit. But also nothing like you.”

He leaned back, pondering things. “He'll want a tribute at some point. Daedra always want something.”

“I know.” I leaned over to him. “It's not going to be this. I promised entertainment, but I'm going to save you and make you the happiest person in reality, and it'll be stable and... as sane as this can be.”

He smiled. “I know.”

Spread an impossible warmth all through me.

“So it'll be something else. I have an idea, very vague, very half-baked, one I had many years ago but without form and direction, little research hobby of mine, no more. May be able to apply it here somewhere. Especially if things look really hopeless and set in stone.” I won't write what it is; I'm superstitious about the written word when it comes to this sort of thing.

“I thought so,” he said, leaning closer still, lowering his voice. As if scared of being overheard even in the most secure places he owns, but then again after having information taken from your own shadow, I guess it's normal to be fidgety. “I had an idea I've been pursuing, of connecting my consciousness with the city, so when the day comes...”

“Think of something else. The city will have to get along without you.”

He tilted his head.

“If I can't save you staying here, I'll have to take you out of here.” I don't know where that came from, the threads of thought only connected afterwards. “I know you're attached to the place. But I think you'll have to let it go eventually.”

He part looked me over, part looked into his far-away calculations. “Interesting.” I don't know what he saw at that time. “What if I chose to stay here and prioritise this?”

“We have to do good enough work beforehand that you won't have to. And if that fails, well, do you think I'd just let you go?”

He looked at me with a curious expression.

I thought that over. “Actually that sounds threatening from someone in my position. Forget that one. Let's see...”

Slowly, he broke into a smile again. “I find I don’t mind. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad.”

Negotiations

So, we settle back into routine, Sil's pondering in his almost-off-limits space more than usual, I don't ask directly but comment on it, and he says he has to think about something, and he'll let me know. That's alright for me.

Then one morning, he says "Let's visit Vivec."

Alright. So we pack some things, he puts all his meticulous provisions into place for leaving the city, and causes a huge wave of panic among the Apostles, what, so soon, what, not to the Psijics, is this another emergency, what shall we do, Lord Seht, before you leave, would you please look at this plan I've drawn up, Lord Seht, there's still the matter of the pipe fragments in the mechanical fundament, and so on and so on.

I tell them, "Don't worry, I'll take care of him, he'll come back safe and alive", and that causes even more chaos, and I say, "Can't a god just visit his brother?", and I see Sil stifling a smile and I see I really shouldn't have said that, and promptly there's even more chaos, "But that's in Vvardenfell, we have no preparations in place, Lord Seht has never in many years,"...

Miraculously, we made it to Vvardenfell.

As soon as we set foot there, he asks me to summon my patron, and he wants to talk.

(Good thing his poor Apostles didn't have to hear that.)

Since he's told me not to write down anything about the actual content of the conversation, I won't.

With his permission, just these few notes: His heart seems a little lighter and so is mine.

And I told him afterwards, "If the thing with the city doesn't work out, you could become an advocate for deals with Daedra."

He smiled and said he'd rather not. And that I haven't done so badly myself; he had a foundation to work with.

Another thing I learned that I can write down is that Sheogorath said what occurred with us was all our doing; all he did was give me a little shove and a little extra courage one time cause I asked so nicely. And his congratulations and compliments, and he knew I would go and make things interesting one day.

And that outside of the contract, to help me make things interesting, he's going to throw in a little gift for all of us, Sil and me as well as himself, and give me a little hint one time in the future, and I'd better take it.

No pressure at all.

Well. The load of failure has been lightened a little; now it's up to us to succeed instead. This concludes what I can say.

Off to meet a poet at last. I'm not sure which of the two gives the worse headaches, Sheogorath or Vivec. But I still think it's Vivec.

Chapter 39

While we're here, on Nirn, where things are more unstable, which helps me with my work... I'm taking the first step in the project. So I've been tinkering with the fake portals again, trying to find Riakil, my best hope and my favourite Bosmer mystic. But I can't find him.

He's supposed to be in my role in history but in another timeline of some kind. I haven't quite figured it out yet. But that book I got gives me hints on what we should do. And some other bits and pieces I've found over the years. Time to put it all into practice.

We need a connection, I believe, and we also need marked differences. And then somehow we need to bring it all together.

But where in Oblivion is he?

As if these portals weren't hard enough to create in the first place. Reverse-made from a few of the things I've found in the wild over the years. Strange things. No one in the Mages Guild could give me an answer at the time, so I made it my private project.

But whoever made these, faulty or not, was highly skilled, that's for sure. Unless they're a natural occurrence. In which case the one who made them is indeed highly skilled, and a mystic representative of Lorkhan is indeed just what I need for this.

One more idea.

He was going somewhere last time we spoke, in the vision he sent me.

In my time with the Planemeld crisis, there were some stints in different realms of Oblivion.

Alternate timeline Oblivion, what a mess. Dangerous mess. But I've got to try.

Sil lets me and gives me the space to try. Of course he knows why I'm actually putting the ideas into practice now, and it's because of him. But it goes beyond that. He's stressed several times that he knew who and what I am when he accepted me, and that he's got no interest in curtailing my methods and ideas. I really like that.

Told him if he ever genuinely minds something I'm doing or thinking of, he should tell me, and I'll listen. He inclined his head with this ironic smile, and while it was so charming, it also took me a few moments to get what it related to. "Oh right," I said, "normally one's supposed to listen to a god anyway."

His smile grew, and he leaned in and said, "Don't bother with normal."

Sends shivers down my spine again just remembering.

I've got to succeed, no way around it. Tap into alternate timeline Oblivion, no problem, I can do that. If I come out a little frayed at the edges, it doesn't matter.

Chapter 40

Found him. Coldharbour it was. My first guess, thankfully; I'm not sure how many more of those portals I would have withstood in one day.

I explained him briefly what I was trying to do and why, and Riakil's in.

In my exhaustion from figuring out the portals, I did something embarrassing and told him he was like a little brother to me. Cause he is. And he looked so happy at that and made it quasi-official. So I guess I've got a Bosmer mystic from another timeline in my family now.

I like it.

On the downside, I forgot to tell him to do something interesting, something different. If we both just sacrifice someone, slap Molag Bal on the wrist and get our souls back from Meridia, that's a little identical. There won't be a need for a rupture and re-stitching of reality like the texts portray. And we need that.

But despite all I wouldn't have the heart to tell him to do *specific* things differently from me. Who knows what his circumstances are at this point, and who knows about some of his values? For all I adore him, I don't know enough.

Instead, I know another thing: Riakil's the type to listen a little too readily to what you say if he likes you and wants to please you. I don't want any of that on my conscience.

No, I'll just let him do what he wants. He's Lorkhan's; he'll fabricate enough chaos on his own.

Perhaps if we had a third one...

Three is an elegant number for outlandish magical endeavours. Common for a reason.

Well, enough messing around with planes, and enough notes on my own freshly-adopted mystic brother, and back to Sil's.

The talk.

Here is the true nefarious price on my sanity that Sheogorath extracted: I'm starting to like Vivec.

We're in a secluded place for a few days like I'd hoped, not the Temple, but he's not stupid, he must've known it'd have to be something like this if he wanted to get to know anything when Sil's involved.

Sil is relaxing bit by bit. And he wants me around for everything, and I love that.

From the start he's been completely unapologetic about the whole thing. (Multiple saving of Morrowind none withstanding, I'm still a controversial presence in this particular capacity after all.)

Setting the rules, I guess. For example, lying his head in my lap for an afternoon talk between the three of us and then naturally going on about some metaphysical matter I can barely follow, especially not like that.

I'm thrilled beyond words, and I could go on about that, for pages I bet, but for now, let's move on.

Well, earlier he told me Vivec wanted to talk to me alone, and it'd probably be a lot of warnings, and he left me with that little smile to do some work.

The talk that every mer or man not-so-secretly dreads, and normally it's coming from a more normal source than Vivec.

He sat opposite me in an important and regal position because he's Vivec, and started, "I had been wondering in idle moments why the saviour of Morrowind and my Champion would be someone such as you."

"A Daedra worshipper?"

"An open Daedra worshipper, a Daedric champion, a heretic and blasphemer, who, for all the problems he solves, causes as much trouble and as many complaints in nearly every region he passes. But now it makes sense."

"Sil, yeah?"

"You're what he needs," he said. "One could say it was inevitable as soon as you met, and maybe long before that. Don't disappoint him."

"Never," I said, "I'd never. I may fail in my part on Clockwork City, or other projects, or... history. That can happen, I'm not perfect. And he knows that all too well. But I won't fail him in... you know."

I was going to go on, but he closed his eyes, and opened them after a while, and started recounting facts about Sil and old tales and traits of his, and all the resulting warnings and advice, as if I didn't know most of that and as if I'd needed to hear any more in order to want to treat him well. Part of me was annoyed. But, well, I appreciate the guy caring so much, and if perhaps something of all that helps me do better down the line, that's good, too, and I said so.

He nodded. "There will be detractors."

I joked that the only one I was scared of was my sister.

He said, "That, my friend, is a common sentiment."

I've never been good at not reacting. And so he knew that I knew something, and I knew that he knew something.

"For the beginning, let me handle it," he said, and of course he wasn't talking about Miziah. He then sat back and said, "Tell me about your family."

So I did, and the conversation took back as normal a turn as the circumstances permitted. I spoke more openly than I expected about my ambiguities concerning my House, too.

He asked if I was planning to disavow it, looking also at the substantial pile of complaints from a certain mushroom-tower-covered region to the east, with a few notable exceptions.

I said, "I'm not going to disavow a thing. My family is my family – I only have my sister left, and I could be a better brother, but it stands – and House Dres is my House. And I speak for it as much as any other member. If it's not a unified picture, good; why would it be?"

I didn't know what his amused expression referred to in particular, so I added a part of my own: "I know, don't let Sil's followers and scripture writers hear that. Lorkhan's or Sheogorath's lie and all that, the perfect unity in the machine... Next page they'll bother mentioning his love of imperfection again, of course, and never try to make a connection."

"Yes, I can indeed see why," he said and got up.

I followed suit. "He won't regret it. I promise you that. Other people might, but that's not my problem."

"Should you succeed in giving my brother something not tarnished by regret, you will have my gratitude."

He opened the door. End of conversation. Of course he has to have the dramatic last word, he's Vivec.

But I think we've got something closer to mutual approval than I thought possible, and I notice his talk has barely given me any headache or symptoms of aggressive annoyance. So he can do it if he wants to.

Maybe he has the headache now from speaking clearly and relatively un-pompously for such a long stretch of time.

Chapter 42

Well, my sister isn't talking to me anymore.

And I can't even blame her.

Couple days ago, I mentioned to Sil that I kind of missed Clockwork City, and he was visibly pleased at that, but asked what about my sister, and that I was carrying that worry around with me everywhere and had even confessed it to Vivec, which meant it must be bad.

Always on point, and always knowing everything, and trust him to retain every scrap of knowledge and stab you with it later, and it'd be maddening if it didn't just make me want to kiss him. And he knows that, too.

In any case, I was still voicing misgivings, and Vivec said if he's taking care of talking to *their* sister to smooth the likely existing waves for now, I should go talk to my own.

When talking to your own sister becomes your part of a bargain, you know you're being stupid and should just get over yourself and take responsibility.

Or so I thought.

I took a portal to Kragenmoor, and Sil was going to wait for me at Vivec's or fetch me back if I didn't get it right (portal magic and I is still a volatile relationship), and we'd go back to Clockwork City together cause after last time I have my apprehensions about getting in there on my own. I think one can hardly blame me.

So I got to Kragenmoor and talked to Miziah. To employ massive understatement, she didn't take it well. Actually told me she couldn't talk to me anymore, and asked me to leave.

I thought maybe she'd cool down overnight, so I stayed in Kragenmoor in a tiny corner club room that really could've used better walls in addition to better everything, barely slept, was miserable and wanted home, but stayed, went back to her the next day, and she still won't talk to me.

And of course she won't. That's her god. And she's a properly devout mer, not like me, I'm not like that even with my own patron god.

Of course she won't take it well; this isn't just a matter of giving it some time to settle or letting her process the information. That information itself is destructive like a mistuned Dwemer device in a kwama mine.

So I'm going back to Vvardenfell. I'm too down to attempt a portal; I'd just land in Craglorn or something. I'll contact Sil with that thing he built, and they'll fetch me.

I don't regret the facts, never could, never in as many eras as this world gets granted. He's everything and that's the end of all else.

And I can't sensibly regret telling her cause it was an inevitability, and she'd have found out sooner or later anyway, cause for all that he's a subtle person, *we're* not subtle, and gossip is spreading among the Apostles already and is going to reach the outside, too. And then what? No, better like this, from myself, brief and painful but direct.

I just regret the simple related inevitability of it having come to this.

Am I starting to talk like him? Maybe a bit.

Who'd have thought, though? With all her and I've been through together, with all the shit we tolerated with each other and all the flaws and differences in worldview and morality, and all the failure and scandals we overlooked to stay family, that our falling-out would be over me liking one of the Tribunal too much.

Chapter 43

We stayed at Vivec's hideout for longer after all. I was brooding for a day. Being effectively all out of family except for the concept of your Great House will do that to you.

I was hesitant to accept comfort from Sil, too, at first, given that he'd gone through worse and was expecting to go through much worse even than that. But I wanted him around, and to make sure he knew I had no regrets.

By afternoon, Sil surprised me by getting out sujamma for the three of us. "You mentioned that you'd need this for that conversation," he said.

"She didn't even let me get far enough in the talk for us to get drunk together. Normally that's how we fix things. No, make that past tense." I grimaced. "My family sounds almost as healthy as yours."

Sil beckoned Vivec over with just the fraction of a gesture and opened a bottle.

I've never been one to thank the Tribunal after my childhood confused between my parents' faiths, but two imposter gods sat with me that night and bothered to listen to my brooding and complaints over drinks, and then gradually the focus shifted to philosophical questions, and I'm starting to feel whole again, and that was pretty good.

Reputation

Next day it was just us in the house, the Warrior Poet being about some god business in the temple, or more likely, not so subtly giving us space.

Cool day, a bit of matching cool daylight coming in through the small windows, traditional bed of coals glimmering in the middle of the room, cushions, more talk.

Sil started the conversation with the worst possible question: “Do you want to leave this and make up with your sister?”

I’ll spare this journal my string of words and promises to convince him of what utter nonsense that was. It was extensive.

He smiled and sat back, posture relaxing, “In that case.”

He does that. Translation: ‘I acknowledge your statement, and I like it. The first preliminary condition for this conversation is passed, so now the real talk can start.’

“Your sister isn’t the first to disapprove, nor will she be the last,” he said and steepled his fingers before his next thought. That gesture draws me in and paralyses me systematically, but paralysed isn’t a bad state to be in for a lengthy conversation with him. He saw, of course, and he knows, because he gave a little smile, just a little touch warmer, eyes trailing down –challenging all my willpower not to pull him close right then, but I’d listen.

He leaned back further and continued. “I’m not supposed to be a private person with that kind of private life. I fulfil a function, and that is supposed to be all.”

I’d let him talk, but first I had to interrupt. “Is that your expectation or others’? Cause we can fix it if it’s just yours.”

A faint smile. “I know. You’re already...” He shook his head. “It’s not just mine.”

“Well, they’ll have to get over themselves, cause that’s nonsense. It’s really easy for them to say, they don’t have to live like that, they can just say you’re a god so you’re different. Problem solved. But you’re not a god, you’re a brilliant mage, yeah, and you’ve got those powers, but powers don’t turn you into a different being all of a sudden. You’re a mer, and also you’re my mer now, and I’m not accepting that.”

He smiled again, an ironic one now. “See how you talk to me? Unacceptable.”

I grinned. “Well.”

His smile lingered; then he turned serious again. “This is part of it. You. Specifically. And how we are. They can forgive my siblings the small and large transgressions that they perceive to be in their nature, but those don’t last, and the hierarchy is always in place.”

“Then what about that Molag Bal business? I mean, I’ve met the guy, and...” I shook my head.

Amusement crept into his eyes, but he waved off the question. “Another time.”

“Of course. Sorry.”

He leaned over and quickly kissed my lips. Enchanting.

He sat back again. “Now you. You’re not a believer, but perhaps that could be forgiven, too. And perhaps I could be forgiven if I treated you as is expected for the station. But of course that is not what this is. You’re with me to stay, for one. And perhaps even that could be forgiven were you a demure follower, acting honoured and knowing your place.”

“I *am* honoured,” I said. “That at least. Not like they’d want. But I am. You’d give me your heart, you’d trust me, you’d be with me, and you’re simply the most mesmerising and maddening creature in this reality, or any reality. And you’re also far too good for me.”

He looked about to object, and I knew the typical objections, so I waved them off. “Yes, I know, but despite all. Objectively, from a moral standpoint, I don’t deserve you at all.”

He leaned in close, and spoke close to my ear, in a low voice, “You’re the only one who does. You’re the only one I want.”

My heart stood still. “That’s the honour,” I said at last.

Still close. “And that’s the problem.” He sat back again, and continued, his voice raised to a regular level again. “For certain people, and for propriety, you’re already too close. You could have an influence. You could put me under your spell and be a threat.” The corners of his lips twitched in what did not want to be known as a disparaging way; settled into mild irony. “And worse, you act like it. You act like you know, and I don’t tell you off.”

“That’s terrible,” I said.

A short laugh. Got him. Then it was back to neutral. “So this is the situation as it appears in people’s minds around us, and the impression will increase. There will be those wishing us well, but this will not disappear. So.” He tensed up. Looked me over. “What do you want to do about this?”

So this was the stuff he picked up all the time. And today the gloves were off to let me know, after I’d gone through the personal part of it myself.

He raised his index finger as if to cut off the first answer. “And I mean in the long run. Can you handle this?”

“Of course I can. And I will, and I want to, cause it’s you. Everything’s always worth it if it’s you.”

His expression softened. “Then what do you want to do?”

“Do you want the sanitised answer, without pettiness and murky instincts, or the true one?”

Surprise there on his face. I love managing that. “I think you know the answer to that.”

“The true one, then. Two things.”

“What is the first?”

“I want to love you and treat you well and be good to you and never wrong you in any way and to stand by you in all eternity.”

His eyes narrowed, and he leaned closer again, just a bit. “That was more than one.”

“That was the first,” I said.

“And the second?”

“Make sure they’re right to be upset.”

A smile fought its way onto his face. “Salyn.”

I’ll never get used to the way he says my name.

He leaned closer still. “I do always like the way you think.”

Chapter 45

Metallic things are creaking and clanking around me again, oil is floating by calmly, and the sky is its usual melancholically tinged warm-coloured dome on which you can watch the time pass, and would you believe it, the lights really do brighten up when he gets here. You can see it just for a split second when you're at his side. (It's just like my regular life; he appears, everything brightens up.)

He stood and looked at me, and I realised I was wearing a big smile at being back here, and he set out to talk and stopped again and looked at me a moment longer, and steepled his fingers, and said "Welcome home."

I took hold of that tunic he was wearing and pulled him down for a kiss, propriety and appearances be damned, and held on for longer, and I will in no way admit I noticed myself shaking or tears stinging my eyes, not at all. Well, I'm certain he got the message.

So I'm home.

It's the next morning, I'd think it early if everything wasn't already busy around us.

He wants to do some work today, and suggested I go out into the city and find something to do, too. I asked if he was thinking of anything in particular he wanted taken care of.

He gave a little enigmatic smile and said, "Do whatever you feel like. That always seems to work for the best." While I was still appreciating that statement, he added, "And if you want to, fetch me tonight. You always have access. There is a high likelihood I'll forget the time with what I will be working on, but I'll like to be reminded." When he gets almost shy about those moods and predictions, it's deadly.

"You have no idea how much I'll want to find you and remind you," I said, and that smile of his at that, even deadlier.

He told me to find something interesting today, and I said that's what I was talking about just now, cause I can't help myself.

Eventually I stopped delaying him, and he's off in his mostly impenetrable work room, and as I write these thoughts down and ponder what I want to do today, it's dawning on me that we didn't speak to a single Apostle since we arrived yesterday, and I'll get to field their questions and panic and reassure them that yes, Lord Seht is unharmed, no, the world didn't end, and no, he's still got no time to look over those plans.

Fine. Just cause it's him.

Chapter 46

First thing: The factotums in the city know my name now. Entity name has been found.

The Apostles I passed have now cautiously accepted that Lord Seht has been returned to the city more or less intact and without any too cataclysmic events.

Today everyone's got something they want solved. Somehow the tone's changed.

Normally I would have maybe settled for any of those things, but I told them I had clear instructions for the day, and that got them off my back.

I heard one guy mutter, "Lucky". I didn't have the heart to tell him the clear instructions were to 'find something interesting'.

And find something interesting I did. A guy wants to do research on factotum creation and admitted the Apostles have no idea how to make them either, at least not the intelligence part. He asked me if I could believe that. I said I've been here long enough, I'll believe anything.

To his credit, he still wanted my help after that, so he's been explaining me the issue. Of course it gets dangerous. Always does. But I should manage. The destination this errand leads me to is indeed terribly interesting, and I'm just going to assume I've got approval for that because I really want to go.

Chapter 47

I was still listening to the Apostle's explanations and putting down notes on how to approach this project when one of the factotums stopped its sweeping and walked over to me. "Salyn Darovi," its pleasant neutral voice announced, "you are required by Lord Seht at the Cogitum Centralis. Priority setting: Very high. Urgency setting: Very high."

While a tense heavy panic gripped me and I was scanning through possible scenarios in my head, my research commissioner whistled. "You'd better go."

"I'd better." I shoved my notes into my bag. There were things in there that couldn't be left behind even in a hurry.

"You have access, though? Envious."

"For emergencies. I'll be back... sometime. I've got no idea."

"Don't worry," he said. "If we don't all die, that's good enough for me."

I rushed over.

And as promised, access was easy, although the pleasant neutral voice of the security system drove me to want to punch the controls, not that that'd have done anything.

Then I was inside, and the door locked itself behind me.

The room was quiet. Serene even.

Sil was waiting for me, looking unharmed.

I paused for a moment to catch my breath, survey the situation. "Are you alright?" I managed to ask.

"I wonder."

"What happened?"

"Another thing I did not foresee."

Treason. Summerset. Daedra. More Daedra. Different Daedra. But no. That seemed off with the way he was acting.

He tilted his head. "I didn't expect I'd be the one to call you over, and first."

Emergency scenarios. A smile spread on my lips before I could contain it in case I was wrong after all.

He returned it.

So I was right. I walked up to him, trying to keep my damned treacherous hands from shaking. Reached up and ran my fingers through his hair for anchorage.

He allowed it. “I couldn’t stop thinking of you. I found it was affecting my work. It was impossible to concentrate on anything but you.”

Factotum research is most decisively cancelled for an indefinite amount of time.

Chapter 48

It was probably simulated late morning somewhere out there; not down here hidden in our chamber. Sil was watching the ceiling or nothing at all or something far away, looking relaxed until he didn't, and turned to me. "There are two things I want to ask."

When he's like that, it seems out of nowhere but has usually been in fabrication for a long time and only just gotten to the point at which he wants to take the step to talk.

I caressed his hair. "Always."

"The first, then. Do you want to stop your work on the city and pursue something else?"

That one came as a surprise. "Did I give that impression? I know I grumble about the Apostles, and the Factotums, and... everything, really. Yeah. But I love it. And I love you."

A little smile. "I know that. I have been thinking. You're always very concerned with what I want. You take time to figure it out when I don't know or don't tell you. Or you ask me. I'm aware of that. You go out of your way to please me, you solve problems I was only barely aware of. In turn, I haven't asked you a lot."

"Are you serious? You keep asking me to do what I like."

"I'm afraid it may come across as conditional. One gets used to this. So I would like to be clear. I am grateful for your work. But if you would prefer to quit and focus on something different, you can. Your help was a convenient excuse to keep you near me and grant you privileges and a voice in the city, but we are beyond needing that. They know. Perhaps I never needed that in the first place. It was simply the easy path."

I regarded him. "Always ruthlessly clear about yourself, huh. I love that. But you don't have to worry. I'm happy here, with this all. Much as it drives me up the wall. But that's part of it."

He relaxed. "Then just know that this is not conditional. Your work and your help, while appreciated, have no bearing on my love for you. You can cease anytime." He lowered his voice. "All I need is your love."

My breath caught in my chest. I leaned in close. "Need, huh."

Another little smile, narrowed eyes. "Perhaps I should have been clearer about this for a long time, too."

I kissed him in response, and it was really hard to remember through the haze that he wanted to talk about a second thing. Really hard.

Eventually I managed.

He regarded me. "The second." Then he hesitated, maybe thinking it over. "For a while before you arrived, I had been thinking of replacing more of my body with machine parts, for more efficiency. I had been looking into it."

Something cold washed over me, and my thoughts were scrambling to come up with a response.

He smiled. “Your actions give me the impression that you might be upset at that. And so does your face now. Was I right?”

“Yeah, you’re right indeed. Look, whatever you need doing, this is you, and you’re precious, and...”

“And you would prefer finding other solutions. Then we will. Don’t worry about it anymore.” He shifted to lie closer to me.

“Off the table? No more? Just like that?”

“Yes. Just like that.”

“Then I have a question,” I said. “I told you about the factotum research that guy wants done. Where he wants me to go, too. The Mnemonic Planisphere. You always say I should do what I want, but those are your secrets there. Do you want me to do it? Or do you want me to quit before I get started for real?”

He shifted and looked me over, then off into his own thoughts. Frowned a little, came back into the concrete world.

“Found something?” I asked.

“Nothing. Tell me what you’d like.”

“I don’t want to upset you. I’m serious about that. That said, this is fascinating. I don’t know what the Apostles do, how to build the things in the material realm, but I *am* a conjurer, I work with souls, and I’ve worked with soulless minds. Like my own in the past, for instance. This might be just my kind of thing. But. You say the word, and I quit it. He’ll accept that. For one thing, your word is law anyway. But you’re not actually too happy with that, are you? So for another...” I grinned. “Right now they all probably think the city’s ending any minute. Easy to say I’m too busy.”

“Ah yes... that.” He was biting back a grin of his own, and it was fucking endearing.

“Don’t worry,” I said, “I’ll just say it’s Summerset. That’s credible enough.”

He let the grin happen. Restraint. I needed restraint.

“A good idea,” he said. “Eventually, we will have to turn our attention there anyway. But for now... Look into this project, if you like. The reasons aren’t clear to me, only that I want you to.”

“Then I will.” I kissed his neck, restraint be damned.

“But not now.”

“Definitely not now.”

Chapter 49

Factotum research got put aside yet again, this time right there on location: Crisis in the Mnemonic Planisphere. As in, the very place I was supposed to go to anyway. Of course Sil would want me here to deal with this; this isn't something to put in just anyone's hands. I'm glad it was me, too.

Just wondering. Why do people listen to me?

I mean, a lot of the time in my life they don't, and I wouldn't want them to by principle, except when I do.

But sometimes I wonder. I told the apprentice at the Planisphere what my own investment in this was and why I wanted her to take over her duty, and somehow that was enough for her to give up her self. So we have a new astronomer. I'm glad that's taken care of.

Then I helped put the place and the scattered memories back in order, entirely, not just what was immediately necessary, and got rid of all the unwelcome company.

I'm finding myself getting rather protective when it comes to Sil, though I've developed that streak here before even meeting him. Sometimes I can't blame the overeager Apostles too much, though my adoration comes from a very different place.

Told Sil right when I went to fetch him and while he was still extracting himself from his work instruments. He has that almost sleepy look when he comes out of those sessions and adjusts back to the world, and it makes it impossible to let go of him then. Good thing he doesn't mind. I started saying where I'd been, and that there'd been trouble, and immediately he gave a smile. "Thank you."

"You know already?" I asked.

"I know. I'll let you tell me in your own words later. With your own details that caught your eye."

"I've seen some things..." I held him closer. "You really are ruthless with yourself, aren't you, storing all that for review?"

"I see. And does any of this make any difference? In..."

"Only makes me love you more, the usual." I grinned. "And feeds a pathological protectiveness maybe."

He cut me off with a kiss, and that was that.

"Don't turn your memories of me into stars, by the way" I said later in our room, watching the artificial light play over his skin. "I want that emotional attachment to *stay* attached."

"It couldn't be otherwise." He paused. "And if it winds up as thousands of years of such memories

of you?”

“Then that’s perfect. And we’ll still need to make more.”

He looked pleased, and his arm snaked around me. “Don’t worry. I know what to keep close. Why do you think I let myself get distracted by thoughts of you?”

“A very good point. Keep doing that.”

An ironic smile twitched around his lips. “I suppose I will.”

“Then there’s the privacy concern, of course. On the other hand...”

“...It would be lonely if there was nothing of you there. Thoughts of you belong there as much as anything, if not more. It’s true I’m not normally bothered with the issue of others, and privacy...”

“Make them blush.”

“That would...” He broke into quiet laughter. “This will not...” He lay back, looked back over at me. “This is a new concern.”

“I know.” I pulled him closer again, and he nestled against me. “You’ll figure something out,” I said. “Something reasonable.”

“Ah, but there lies the true challenge when you’re concerned.” His voice was getting quieter, like he was about to fall asleep.

I combed my fingers through his hair, caught on some snares. “That’s what I feel like every day when it comes to you, you know. Reasonable doesn’t exist and isn’t welcome. But sleep. Your Planisphere is safe and in order. The rest can wait.”

“I would normally be at my work now.”

“You want to be a person. Be a person with me.”

A barely perceptible nod, and he was asleep.

How could I not feed people to duty and destiny for his sake? I knew right then there’d be more, and I knew there’d be no regrets.

Communication skills

“Your sister contacted me.”

That came out of nowhere. He’d just been in the middle of explaining me some constructs on the rooftop of a building you wouldn’t know was there until you had access.

“She did?”

“Prayer.”

I took a moment to process that. She still prays to him. Or if he thought it worth mentioning, rather ‘prays again’. It was hard to keep the bitterness off my face, but then, he sees through me anyway, even if he claims he doesn’t. He just knows less by comparison. But he knows me. So eventually I just let that bitter smile happen as it wanted. Tried a joke. “So to you she talks. Typical.” There was less of a joke in there than I’d wanted.

“In a way,” he said. Quiet, calm. But his eyes were probing. Something more to it, then.

“Did you answer?” Too plain. Too accusatory. This wouldn’t be how I talked to him. Absolutely not. Say something more, something different. “By the way. I never told you. Remember in Ebonheart, when I had to help you three get your followers back against some childish pranks? Your representative said you heard all prayers but didn’t answer all. Made me laugh. Maybe that was the first time I thought there might be something likeable about you. Relatable. Something.”

Sil leaned down to kiss me, and I could feel the bitterness dissipate. “I remember.”

“You do? Seriously?”

“Yes. I didn’t know what you’d be then, but I remember being just a bit intrigued.” He kissed me again. “Better?”

He knows me well, or I’m very transparent. “Better.”

He looked out over the city. “I answered. I was tempted not to. This is not the kind of conversation I’m accustomed to having.”

I smiled. “Me either, you know.”

“I know.”

“And?”

“She will need time. But she misses you. And she said she might have been rash.” He stalled.

I felt like I’d been plunged into the Ghost Sea. A chance to get my sister back. But he was stalling. Stalling meant difficult topics, one way or another. “There’s more?”

“We talked a bit. She admitted it might have been easier on her if this was the kind of thing one expected from some gods. I may have been unhelpful.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Now I’m curious. What’d you say?”

“I said it would have been easier for her if I’d just used you. She looked stricken, and then she

started to cry. I should not be having these conversations. I usually leave these kinds of things to my siblings.”

I pulled him close. “Thank you. Thank you for caring so much. You know... From one person who’s terrible at this stuff to another, I know exactly what that means.”

“You’re welcome.”

“And then?”

He stepped back to look at me. Always watching me. I can’t deny I love that. “She said maybe I was right.”

Well, damn. “People really tell you all kinds of things, don’t they.”

“I don’t ask for it.” With just the hint of a pained smile.

I had to grin at that, I couldn’t help it. “And then?”

“She said it would have made it easier to get her brother back. And that she really wanted her brother back.”

“By Sheogorath, she said that? Really?”

He blinked once, barely twice, and then he was laughing. “Just how is it that your sister is praying to me, while you’re next to me, swearing by a Daedric Prince?”

“You know you like it.”

“I know I do. Well. I told her I didn’t want to give you away anymore. But she was welcome to visit when she was ready.”

“You did that? And?”

“She said she would think about it. Sshe will come around. Just give it time.”

All the jokes were exhausted, and the tears were stinging my eyes, and I held on to him and buried my face in his robe because that was somehow still more dignified than the alternative.

He wrapped his arms around me. We stood like that for a while, and then he said, “I still don’t see such hope for myself.”

The things he says out of nowhere and the things they do to me. They can go in a lot of directions. But a common one is making me try harder at something unreasonable. I gritted my teeth and clenched my fists in his robe. “You know...”

He acknowledged me with a small shift in his posture.

“You know,” I started again. “I’ll need a different toolset.”

“This is about that idea of yours.”

“If a machine can’t be fixed, you have to take it apart, right? That’s what your people always teach. I don’t deal in machines. But if a reality can’t be fixed and is stubborn, it’s time to take it apart, too. Just a bit. Just to allow some flexibility in again. Let something new come in. And you talk about seeing not one future but several, correct?”

His fingers ran through my hair. He was very calm, on the surface, almost quiet, but I caught the smallest hum of approval.

Then he spoke up, and humour crept into his voice. “Are you sure you’re not just trying to impress me? Because you don’t need to do that anymore.”

I grinned. “If I impress you, that’s just a welcome side effect.”

Peaceful silence again. Conversation ended with approval. Not so bad.

But he’d been the one to start this. And he was asking for approval just as much, wasn’t he? If not more. In fact, he didn’t start these talks spontaneously. Serious topics took him contemplation and weighing of options, and the nerve to come out and say something.

“Say...” I looked up at him. “When did she contact you anyway? This being you, I suddenly find myself doubting it was just now.”

“You know me. Last week.” Didn’t even deny anything about the situation.

Last week. I inhaled, exhaled. Looked him over, and kissed him. “That’s alright. I get with you, I deal with this.”

Now he actually relaxed.

In fact... “That talk the other day. About me working for you. Might that have been you worrying about using me by accident?”

“I might have been.”

I grinned. “You know, if there’s one thing you and I excel at, it’s communication.”

He smiled back at me, with a dozen layers. “This is much better than my usual.”

“Oh, me too, you know it. Me too.”

Chapter 51

“Bad day,” I stated as soon as I saw him.

His smile was tired. “I’m getting transparent to you, it seems.”

“Want to talk?”

He shook his head, which doesn’t often mean ‘no’, and started talking.

“In summary,” he ended, “there are times I regret listening to people.”

“For one, I understand the sentiment completely. For another... you need a different kind of voice in there. Say... the thought has never occurred to me.”

He raised his eyebrows.

“That prayer matter would be a useful way to contact you quickly.”

“Salyn...”

“Now I’m not sure my patron would approve. In fact, I’m not sure *I’d* approve. Goes against all my standards and rules. Say... does it work if it’s not a sincere prayer?”

“Oh, it does.” He sighed. “It does. That is a category in and of itself, one you would find amusing.”

“So I could. In theory.”

“Salyn.”

“Yeah?”

Sil’s features were gradually brightening up with amusement, and that was all that counted here. “You would immediately find ways to abuse it. I can imagine it too well.”

I grinned and leaned closer. “Can you?”

He shook his head with a smile he hid away half-heartedly. “I can.”

“You like to?”

“Perhaps I do. And that’s part of the reason this is a bad idea.”

“You know what you do to me when you say things like that?”

He stopped hiding his smile. “I have an idea of that, too. But for now... Why don’t I teach you other ways of communication in the city first? We’re not lacking here.”

I know my eyes brightened up at that. “Can I make a wish?”

“You always can.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Make your wish.”

“How do you do the book printing? Make those slabs? Get every terrible thing stored in the city archives?”

He looked at me for a moment. “This is a bad idea, too.”

“Oh, come on. It can’t be worse than what’s already there.”

“Another jab at Apostle scripture?”

“Oh no, not this time. You know you’ve got *The Sultry Argonian Bard* in there, and poems about how Morrowind is by far the best at depravity, and the Bretons have got nothing on us, right?”

“We... what?”

“Your employees at the Wellspring must be especially bored.”

Sil let out something between a laugh and a sigh. “There are the times when the isolation of work is welcome. It prevents me from knowing about things like this. But you just had to change my mind about the isolation, at least when it involves you.”

“You salvaged that one.”

His eyes softened. “You know it.”

“I know.” I wrapped my arm around his neck and pulled him closer. “I know.”

He came closer still, just before kissing me but didn’t, maddening. “Salyn...”

“I’ll never get enough of the way you say my name.”

He smiled, tilted his head, moved closer. “I know that, too.”

“Sil...”

“Now, before I lose all composure, let me answer. I’ll show you. If you can try to at least not be too much worse than that.”

“Deal,” I said and pulled him all the way close to finally kiss him, and as always, this was the sweeter victory than anything else, and as always, the rest of the world was lost.

Observations

We had a curious conversation today, Sil and I.

He started it.

Made sure we were all locked up in our little room with as high a security level as we could be; he actually checked the locks and settings a few times. He can be fidgety, but not often to that degree.

I raised my eyebrows. "Come on, tell me."

He looked at the door suspiciously once more like it was about to betray him, and sat down on the opposite bench to mine, in that measured way you're supposed to read as calm, but he was tense, I could tell.

"I would like to figure something out," he said. "Will you help me?"

"Of course."

"Then tell me. And tell me honestly. Do you think you could actually hurt me?"

"I could never. Well." I pursed my lips. "I want to say I couldn't, but I know I've got my flaws. I might. But there are things I'd never do, and you know that, I mean all my promises. But I did something, didn't I?"

He smiled and shook his head. "You didn't. And I don't mean hurting my feelings. Let me try this again. Assume we fought. Not an argument, but a battle."

"What is that about now? I don't want to fight you. I won't, simple."

"Assume we were not a couple but mortal enemies."

"I don't want to do that."

"Humour me," he said. "Imagine we didn't know each other, and we were both serious about it. Do you think you could actually hurt me if you tried?"

"Insistent, aren't you? Fine, I'll bite. It's hard to say. I could probably get at least a scratch in, and even that is too much for me. I simply don't want to hurt you. But that's not what you want to hear, right? How do I gauge you, is that it?"

"Assume it is for a moment."

So it wasn't it. But I had no idea what he was getting at, so I continued on that track. "Fine. Well. How much better than your shadow are you in a fight? Cause, well... You know how that ended."

He sometimes gets that incredulous look at me. He's getting used to me, and so it's getting less, but sometimes he still gets it, and that was one of those times. Then he started laughing. That quiet laugh that you barely hear but you can see, and you can see him hiding it. "You really are serious, aren't you? This is genuine."

"Just what might you be referring to?"

"This..." He looked back at me, composure regained, except for that bit of a smile tugging at his

lips. “If I didn’t enjoy it so much, I might call it arrogance. It’s real. It would seem I merely needed a reminder.”

“And... you’re pleased.”

He was still for just a moment, then he shifted, looked away, movements almost deliberate, but not quite.

“You are. You *are* pleased. Come on, tell me, what’s this about?”

He avoided looking at me.

“You’re embarrassed.” I probably sounded too delighted for propriety, but screw that. “Tell me. Now I want to know. What did you think wasn’t genuine? And why’s this a good thing?”

“Perhaps, I thought, you were simply giving me another thing I wanted. As people do. Habits of others can become habits of thought of one’s own. It was foolish. Forget about it.”

By now I couldn’t stop smiling. “Impossible. You can’t expect me to forget about that now. So,” I leaned closer to him, “what’s this that you want?”

“Salyn...”

I reached out and ran my fingers through that pretty hair of his. He leaned into the touch, stiffened, then relaxed again. Someone tell me how a single person can be so gorgeous.

“It is,” he said at last, “this, specifically. How you are with me.”

I’d thought it was impossible to smile more than I already did, but I’d thought wrong. “It’s all real. As much as you want. And I’ll give you everything you want. *Because* it’s real.”

He leaned in and kissed me with a sense of urgency that I can never help responding to and that usually means the conversation is over. I pulled him over to me, and he relented and sat down on my bench, so I wrapped my arms around him and kissed him more. But there was more to talk about, wasn’t there?

“Tell me,” I muttered, kissing down his neck and partly cursing myself for insisting on this conversation. “What brought this about?”

“You’d like to hear?” His breath was shaky. Damn it. Damn myself.

“I’d like to.” My voice was barely there, and not at all convincing of a composed and interested state. I cleared my throat. “’scuse me.”

He let out his quiet laugh and shifted to lean his back against my chest, and I wrapped my arms around him again.

“Tell me,” I said.

He took a moment. “You mentioned the memories you saw in the Planisphere. We never quite got around to talking about that. But it did not leave me any rest. So I went back today, to see for myself. Perhaps with less detachment. To see what you saw.”

So that was it. “You’re talking about all those people fawning over you or complaining to you

about how you couldn't be equals. Well, don't worry about that. Because you're not getting that from me."

He was perfectly still and then relaxed against me. "Of course you would know immediately what I was referring to. Curious, those memories were all filed away when I arrived. The Astronomer barely remembered what had been cut loose before. And you had done most of the sorting yourself."

"And you knew what to seek out." I kissed his neck. "You know I don't care about that murder scandal and whatever else there was. And you know what would have gotten to me when I saw it. Don't you?"

"I suppose I do."

"Reassured?"

"Perhaps."

I kissed his neck again, and again. "But? You're still tense."

"I understand you're different. But you're almost too different. I understand you don't worry about me so much out of any fear, or out of excessive awe for divinity... which you don't even recognise. But then why?"

"Can't I just love you?"

"But there's more, isn't there?"

"For one thing," I said, "I think you're just not used to anyone sincerely caring what you want. So you look for reasons."

"Perhaps."

I sighed. "But I saw those memories, so it's only fair if I talk more, too. It had to go there someday, didn't it?"

"Tell me."

"Sil. I'm from a slaver family. You know that. You know a lot of things about a lot of people, too. But you know what it's like growing up like that?"

This was where one should normally wait for responses, gauge understanding levels, but I didn't; the door had been opened once, so there it was now.

"I've seen worse since. Apparently my family was among the better ones for whatever that's worth, but when you grow up, you see and hear things, you don't understand, you don't get the context or who's right and whose fault what is, all you know is what's around you is sickening and you want no part in it. Add a general broken family at the time. You may wonder how my little sister ended up in the business then. Or maybe you don't wonder cause you know people."

"I..." He paused. "Not as much as you'd expect... or perhaps you wouldn't. Go on."

I kissed his hair. Sweet. Mine. I went on. "She was something like my parents' second chance, and things were better since she arrived. She didn't witness the worst of it. Somehow, she took to it as a

normal thing. Before my parents were killed, she learned, and studied, and practiced how to talk. And she was clearly going to be the successor. I snuck away from responsibility as much as I could.”

Sil leaned back further against me, a simple gesture of trust, in that kind of conversation. Meant more than I can put down here.

I ran my fingers through his hair. “You’re so pretty, you know that?”

He turned around to me with a smile, then leaned back against me again. “Go on,” he said. “Studied how to talk, you say.”

I pulled him closer to me still. “Yeah. How to talk to people. The subordinates. The goods. Whatever you want to call it. How to make sure you’re obeyed. How to make people not have a will of their own. And all the time I tried my best not to learn anything.”

Sil was quiet for a moment. “I think I understood a few things. You left, of course. To become a mage.”

“To become a summoner, more exactly. That was my first specialty. When I summoned my first Dremora, I noticed what I was doing.”

“I see.”

“You do?”

“Most magic is imposing your will upon the world. Conjunction is simply more direct.”

“Yeah, you do get it. Imposing my will upon others and having them fight for me and do my bidding. I tried to set up a code of ethics, but on the other hand I didn’t quit. I just branched out. But I’m thinking I should just cut off the old branches.”

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying? You are, aren’t you? Go on.”

“Well...” Hard to get to a more direct statement from all that cryptic talk. “You’re a fatalist. You talk about not having choices, and being what people need you to be. But I sincerely love you. You’re everything. So I can’t have that, I can’t be like that to you.”

He paused. “You *are* saying it. We were worrying about essentially the same.”

The absurdity of the situation started to creep up on me. “We were, weren’t we? But...”

“Salyn. What do you think I’m doing here? No...” He gestured at the little room we were in. “Not here. Out there, I should say.”

A god, imposter or not, with his own realm. I had to grin. “You have a point.”

He turned around to face me, humour entering his eyes. “Then, do you realise that, being asked why they worry about my wishes in anything, there is nobody in this city who would give this answer you just gave me? You truly are serious about your arrogance.”

I thought about it and had to laugh. “You’re right, aren’t you? Should I apologise?”

“Don’t.” He kissed me briefly, pulled back. “Don’t. This means I have what I want.”

“And that’s what I want to be,” I said. Looked at him more closely. “You know, I think we either

both have a deeply troubled relationship with power, or we're the only sane people around. I can't tell yet which it is. Want to think it's the second. But in either case I'm glad I'm not alone."

He smiled. "You're not."

Chapter 53

It was morning, and as it tends to go, I had a thought while getting presentable. I came back to our little room, and by then, Sil was awake and in a thrown-over robe of mine and already working on something. Looking somewhat dishevelled and very beautiful.

“I love you,” I said by way of greeting, because that was the most obvious thing on my mind.

He smiled at me. “I love you, too.” Didn’t return to his work but regarded me.

There was the other thought, the one I’d been having before he derailed it just by being there. “My love,” I started before I could get derailed again, “I think you’re grappling with the concept of choice. Free will.”

He raised an eyebrow, looked at me some more, his smile changed. “I suppose, in the end it had to come to this.”

“Had to...” I grinned. “Now you’re just messing with me.”

“Perhaps.”

“You want to talk it out?”

“I think I do. But later. For now... Well, I might get dressed, and you should eat something. I might, too.” He tilted his head. “I thought this morning... Do you know something I miss about Vvardenfell? Your cooking.”

“Anytime. You make it possible, you get it.”

He indicated the papers in front of him.

I grinned. “Of course.”

“I’ll be working on the Wellspring question today. And Summerset needs our attention. I’ll arrange a visit with the Psijic Order. Be ready anytime after today.”

“Right. Will you prepare me for the Psijic Order, though? I know them mostly as a myth, and I once knew a guy who was courting one.”

“I suppose I should. But not now.” He got up. “I should get ready.”

“Want me to procure us some breakfast that’s different from the usual?”

He raised his eyebrows.

“I’m down in the city a lot, by your wishes. You hear things. Black market kinds of things. And Divayth gave me some hints, too, back then.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised. And I shouldn’t...” He smiled, just slightly. “Can you vouch for the quality?”

“I can’t. Haven’t tried. Not without you. And not without your approval.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised at that, either. And I appreciate it.” He paused. “Well, if you like.”

Half a prayer

So a few things happened. We're on Artaeum, more later. I met someone who has that feel. That inexplicable thing I sense that is just like what Riacil has. Where something is off in a magical, planar way, because something runs parallel. I'm convinced she has a version somewhere in Riacil's and my role as a soulless opponent of Molag Bal.

And she's associated with Sheogorath.

That's the hint, isn't it? The hint that he'd promised at our meeting. A gift for us and himself, yeah? I should involve her in what I'm trying to do?

Allow me to comment on this for a moment:

For fuck's sake, Sheogorath, she's a Psijic mage!

Do you know what Psijic mages generally do not participate in?

Fucking dragon breaks!

Do you know what Psijic mages generally work to prevent?

Fucking dragon breaks!

Fuck!

I know. I know I've learned to trust you even when one sensibly shouldn't, cause this isn't about being sensible.

So I will. I'll find that version of her that's in Riacil's and my role, and somehow, somehow rope her into this. Happy?

But how?

Why?

Fuck!

The Third

Now that I've calmed down at least a bit, I should mention how I met her.

We got to Artaeum, did the introductions, and who do I meet? My old companion Abnur from the Planemeld crisis.

He said, "There was gossip about Sotha Sil bringing company, but I didn't expect it to be you."

I said, "I didn't know where you'd gone off to, but Artaeum is the last place I'd have expected."

"You're about as unlikely to be here as I am."

"Oh, they only put up with my presence because of my company," I said.

"Then we're not so dissimilar," he said, "although I'd like to think their opinion is changing."

"So you're a proper member of the Order?"

"I am," he said. "It was my wife's idea. She can be convincing."

Then I put the dots together. "You were seeing a Psijic girl back then, weren't you? The one you met right after we got you out, in Davon's Watch. That her? You never told us her name even."

"It is. Her name is Diesala. I wanted her kept as far away from Molag Bal's attention as possible."

"Fair. Paid off then, didn't it, all of it? I remember you saying that one time, something like she's the type where you have to be on your best behaviour, and somehow you end up wanting to be."

"Ah, so you remember that. Well, it did end up 'paying off', as you say, yes."

"Well, congratulations. I get it now, you know. Caught someone like that myself."

He raised his eyebrows. "So the gossip is based on truth, then."

"Well. I can guess at the gossip, but it probably is."

"Then you did well for yourself, and congratulations are in order, too. Might I add, as an aside, if more of the gossip from these very old mages here is true, you accomplished something extraordinary there. But remind me. Didn't you dislike the Tribunal?"

"As gods. Turns out some of them can be very worthwhile as people."

He sighed. "You're like my wife."

"Am I?"

"She worships Shezarr and the Eight. But she did some minor business for Sheogorath, and he said the wrong thing. As a result, she took him by his word and adopted him as her uncle. And now we're all stuck with the situation. As I said, she can be convincing."

That's when I first felt doused in ice water. I think I knew then. Didn't need the extra sense convincing me later. That was only a surplus.

I had to respond, though. “Well, Sheogorath is my own patron, and he *can* be very generous... Might not be a bad thing. But she’s a Psijic mage.” I think I said that more to myself than to him.

“Oh, she is. By the way.” He looked like he does when he doesn’t know how to proceed, which is rare, but it happens. “I should thank you. I never did. Your... unusual and ill-advised defence of Davon’s Watch at the time convinced her to settle there.”

I grinned. “The bone colossus. One of the first really remarkable ones I summoned, and only with the help of House Indoril. Their more pragmatic members *really* get things done.”

“Precisely. She’s from Cyrodiil and lived through too much of that accursed war. She said at the time that the fact that the city had defenders who would summon that kind of creature to prevent a siege convinced her that there was a measure of safety there, and so she settled there while she was on Psijic business in Morrowind. Which allowed me to meet her. So I should thank you.”

I smiled. “You’re very welcome. Glad to know old Balreth was good for something.”

“Would you like to meet her?”

“I very much would.”

And so I met her. Lovely Imperial woman, I could tell what he saw in her, and I could also tell she’s the one I want to look out for in another reality.

She’s also one of those refined Psijic types, talks theory and greater picture, and will never go through with this. Never.

Well. She likes Sheogorath and liked us summoning Balreth. Perhaps... But no, this is ridiculous.

She’s a Psijic mage. This is never going to work.

Chapter 56

Been busy, no time to write, and didn't dare to on Artaeum.

Someone needs to be investigating the Daedric activities in Summerset, and that someone turned out to be me cause the rest are Psijic monks, and also Sil, who has other work on his hands and doesn't want to go down cause he'd be a foreign interloper.

In public, I argued a bit saying, what am I if not a foreign interloper by association, and for my own reputation besides that, have they all forgotten the stuff I did for the Pact in the past, and it wasn't all honourable combat by any stretch either? The Dominion has every reason to resent me. (Almost as much as I resent them.)

Most of the Psijics seemed surprised by me arguing like that, except for one, cause we've had to deal with each other during the Planemeld crisis. The rest of them aren't used to that, and not towards their mentor, either.

In truth, this was the half-baked version of an argument, cause I didn't *really* want them to relent, I just wanted to make a few points and get some concessions.

What I wanted to be was on Tamriel, unsupervised, and not surrounded by a lot of very ancient very powerful mages who watch over reality. So I 'grudgingly' complied in the end and went to investigate.

(Sil knows what this is about, of course, but we don't talk about this while on Artaeum, and otherwise not all that much either; he says the less he knows the better my chances. I don't know if that's superstition born from his world view or accurate prediction, but I'll concede he does often know a good deal more than I could, so I'll go along with it for now.)

First thing I did when I was on my own and unwatched was to edit the formulas I'd worked out for getting to Riakil, to figure out how to get to the alternate Diesala. I didn't dare do that on Artaeum, maybe my own superstition, but from the things this reality's Diesala had said, Psijics have a disconcerting way of knowing absolutely everything they're not supposed to.

Which means I may still be under supervision somehow, but I just have to take my chances with that.

Then I tried to build one of those faulty portals that first got me to meet Riakil by accident. Years ago that was. I never tried to contact anyone new since then, only to find him again cause we got used to each other. So this is a whole different game now.

Took me a few days.

It's harder when I have to build the portals myself, too. The first one was something that was already there that I sensed and tinkered with, and accidentally landed in Riakil's reality and talking to him; I just analysed that to make my own when I wanted to meet him. (Can't do it too often cause it takes a lot out of me. I'm magically useless for days after a successful attempt.)

But.

In the end I found her.

Chapter 57

She greeted me with “Are you back already? Missed the serenity of the order?”

Which was good, meant my alternate self was likely in a similar role to mine here. Also could mean that her time is ahead of mine, if that kind of thing applies at all between realities and when dealing with Artaeum to that. I was still processing that and asked the maybe not all that strategically smart question, “Was I just here with Sotha Sil?”

Alternate Diesala groaned and rolled her eyes, and said, “So they weren’t all closed. Alright. Before we converse any further, I need to establish a few things.”

“Closed?”

“The time breaches,” she said. Sounding impatient.

“Time breaches. So that’s what that was. No, this one I made myself, modelled after the ones I found in the wild.”

“Oh, even better. But no. Before I associate any more with your time line, I want to know some things.”

We then compared and established that her marriage was the same in my timeline, both seem alive and well, she asked about the well-being of a few people I didn’t know, except for my distant cousin Kalathys, who apparently saved her in her timeline (small world), while having died in Cyrodiil in mine.

Someone she mentioned near the beginning was a Telvanni mage I’d never heard of, a Lothryn Simero. Her mentor and a sort of father figure. Noting down so I don’t forget in case he’s somehow important otherwise. Telvanni mages have a habit of being somehow important.

In turn, I learned that in her time, while she had taken care of the Planemeld and a lot of similar work for the Pact that I’d done in mine, ‘I’ had gone straight from ‘my’ studies to helping out in Vvardenfell and then ended up in Clockwork City and with Sil in pretty much the same way from the accounts. That’s reassuring, too.

Then she was sufficiently assured that she could associate with me.

According to her, if two realities get too close of an association with each other, things can start to overlap and bleed over, and she didn’t want any hostile realities on her territory. I can understand that.

“But you’re still talking to me now,” I said. “Shouldn’t you be minding that anything could bleed over from anywhere?”

“This should be alright,” she said. “And I assume you have a reason to contact me. Is this about Nocturnal? Your other self managed that just fine, so you should as well. But if you’re stuck, I can give you some advice.”

“Actually, I haven’t gotten started on that,” I confessed to her apparent amusement.

“So what’s more important?” she asked.

“Saving Sil,” I said.

“I’m listening.”

And she actually listened as I explained.

Including about the dragon break idea.

She asked me what it was actually for, in a concrete sort of way.

I said, truthfully, I don’t know, just that reality seems really stuck and insistent on a bad ending for us all around, so I wanted to shake it up, take some certainty and control out of it. Maybe even bring in some new truths and elements that wouldn’t appear otherwise. But in truth I couldn’t know.

She grinned and looked thoughtful. “Change of the positive kind,” she said at last. “We may be able to work with that.”

“Wait,” I said, “you’re in?”

She shrugged. “I like him, too, and... Well, this is a bit embarrassing, but he was my childhood hero. I spent a lot of time in the Dunmer corner clubs in Cheydinhal when I shouldn’t have, and heard the stories of the Tribunal, and decided I’d become the next Sotha Sil. Didn’t quite go that way, but I did make it into the Psijic order, so at least that. So I consider it as owing a sentimental debt.”

I tried to picture the lady in front of me as a little girl among probably disreputable elements in a corner club and had to grin.

“There’s that,” I said, “earlier you mentioned you’re associating with House Telvanni, too. That guy you wanted to know how he’s doing?”

“I’m *in* House Telvanni,” she replied. “He formally brought me in. If you ever have a need of Restoration magic of the less ethical kind, or the less by-the-books kind, contact him. In my timeline he’s currently in Black Marsh. He’s eccentric but brilliant; you might like him. He might forget answering you for a while, so just try again.”

This was definitely not how I’d imagined this conversation to go. “You’re in House Telvanni. As a Psijic mage. Somehow Abnur neglected to mention that.”

“Perhaps I’m not there in your time. If Kalathys is dead, too...”

I thought about that for a while. Then I sighed. “I really hate that I’m doing this. But I guess I am. Think it over. You seem pretty content where you are. There are questions I can’t answer you. And the third one I’ve got in mind for this, Riakil, I actually have no idea how his world’s version of me or you are doing. But he’s already fixed for this venture, I can’t leave him out.”

“Appreciated,” she said. “Well, the most important factors for me are set in two versions. If it comes down to it, it’ll be two against one. That’s a risk I can take. And you want to save your lover, and I can sympathise with that. I’d be the same. And I’ve seen how the two of you are at least here. So, this Riakil. What’s he like?”

I started to explain, and she cut me off at “Lorkhan”. “Explain,” she said.

So I tried, for as well as I could, since I don’t quite know what’s up with that either.

“Lorkhan,” she muttered. “That’s extremely useful. You do know how to pick your people.”

“That wasn’t why,” I said. “I just like him. He’s my brother now. I found him by accident with that first faulty portal – time breach, you say.”

She looked at me as if to figure out if I was wilfully or unintentionally dense. I’ve seen that look plenty on her husband. “It’s Lorkhan,” she said. “In whatever way. Do you really think accidents are fully accidents?”

I thought about that for a while, taking it in, weighing it, but I could also feel my grasp on this reality waning.

She went on, “I don’t know how to make use of this yet, but of course you *do* also know about the role of the Heart of Lorkhan for the Tribunal’s immortality? And you know about the assumed inevitability of the Nerevarine Prophecy? You may want to keep that in mind.”

I was getting out-planned here at this stage. “Sil has mentioned it, but he links it mostly to his city and what he has to do to keep that going.”

“Of course. Well, that’s where you come in, no?”

“I suppose so, yeah.”

“Alright. Give me some time, and let me talk to my order.”

“Wait.” That got me back awake very quickly. “Did you say talk to your order?”

“What did you think I was going to do?”

“The opposite! I’m looking for help, yeah, but your order is going to oppose that! They’ll work against us! You can’t just talk to them. I was thinking of something more... covert.”

“That’s not how I do things,” she said.

“But...”

“Look, do you want the endorsement of the Psijic order for your dragon break or not?”

That’s what she said. “The endorsement? I was thinking of some practical help and maybe looking the other way at the right moment. And just being part of that as one more of us formerly soulless people.”

“No.” Brief, decided.

“Then...”

“I’ll talk to my people. Positive change is good, and to be encouraged, and...” She paused, tapped her finger against her lips repeatedly. Went on. “If the Psijic order allows its mentor and honorary member to just die, when we could be working towards change for the better, where does that place us?”

I snorted. “You really think you’ll get away with that?”

“I got away with the Necromancy and bringing my husband in, who was an unlikely candidate no matter how you looked at it.”

“Hold on. Necromancy?”

She just smiled. Then added, “And I got to keep the Augur, too.”

“Augur?”

“Talking skull from the Psijic vault, omniscient. He may be able to help, too. Sees angles we don’t. But I first need the permission of the Loremaster to bring him in. I’m not breaching any protocol.”

I was stunned for a while.

She smiled again. “Contact me in a few days. You’ll be busy in Summerset for a while, won’t you? Let me handle this in the meantime.”

I set out to say something a few times but thought better of it each time. Finally, I just said “Alright.”

Since I was also getting dizzy from the strain of the portal, we said our goodbyes, and I returned to my own reality, where I promptly passed out in the grass for a while.

So that’s where we’re at. You know, I’ve made unexpected headway, and that went really well, but somehow I feel like I’ve been beaten.

Chapter 58

Insanely busy again. Actually did my Summerset investigating, all while not using any magic cause I just couldn't. That last portal, excuse me, time break, wiped me out.

I'm too lethargic and too tired to note down the details, just this: The number of involved Daedric Princes and their respective champions or other favourites is rising at a comical rate. I'll have to explain it all to the Psijics sometime soon. They won't be happy to hear about it at all.

How good for them that they have tasked another Prince's champion with this.

(In my arguments as to why I shouldn't be the one doing the investigating, I *somehow* seem to have forgotten this one. But they're Psijics. They either know what I am anyway, or they should rethink their attentiveness.)

Chapter 59

I'll write. Before I can't anymore.

I was about to contact the Psijics when I got a message via projection from Loremaster Celarus, saying he wanted to speak to me. He wasn't too involved in the investigation so far; I'd dealt more with Iachesis in charge, but I didn't see anything suspicious about it. I mentioned I was too drained for portals due to circumstances (being cautious here), and he opened one, and I stepped in.

Turned out it was the *other* Loremaster Celarus. Diesala's. She was there, too.

Gave me a fright, that one.

But he was sympathetic, and we had a long, involved, headache-inducing, but very interesting conversation that I'm forbidden from writing down anywhere.

I learned a few things. We worked on a few things. I'm now supposed to just wait.

And I was dropped back off in my own reality.

Funny how unspectacular that sounds when you write it down.

So now I will try against my nature to just trust things and wait, and waste some more time down here till I have enough magical reserves back to get a portal back to Artaeum (my Artaeum, I mean). I was drained before, but explicably drained. *This* condition here'd be hard to explain. Better give it time. And then I'll deal with more of this Daedric business.

Maybe an inn room. Sleep sounds really damn good right now.

In fact, I really don't feel well.

I may have mentioned this before, but sometimes I really fucking love Telvanni mages. Just a few of them. But those few all the more. You want something done, they get it done, whatever ludicrous thing it may be.

Chapter 60

I was in the process of renting an inn room when Sil opened up a portal for me along with a projection asking me to come home. Got a few raised eyebrows at the inn, that was funny for as much as I could still find anything funny in the state I was in. Took the portal, of course.

When I went though, I saw we weren't on Arteaum but in our room in Clockwork City. Just for now, he said, just to talk in private. Then we'd return.

It's so good to be back. Crazy how much I miss this city when we've been out. Crazy how I miss him when I've been away, too, but that's expected.

I referenced what had happened, in semi-vague terms, said according to certain Psijics things were basically taken care of and just needed waiting now.

For a while after that, he tried to keep a straight face at me having involved Psijics in this but frequently failed.

I also recounted that I'd first expended all my magical reserves on one thing, and then just as I was getting the slightest bit recovered, helped on another much more involved thing, on basically borrowed reserves from more powerful people than me, and some potions and so on, but that was all an artificial temporary augmentation, and now I felt as if I was in magical energy debt instead, negative numbers, and as if it'd take me a long time to even get back to a state of having nothing.

Sil was worried but accepted it for the moment.

Then I got explicit about it anyway, cause fatigue hit and my self-restraint went out the non-existent window. "You know, years ago, that book fell into my hands in that swamp." I lowered my voice. "*Where were you when the dragon broke?* Think it was from another time altogether. It was either not at all for my hands, which is what I thought. Or..."

"Or?" I can tell by now when the curiosity creeps in.

"Well, one of the Psijics mentioned to me that with Lorkhan accidents are rarely truly accidents."

"Lorkhan it is now?" He looked amused.

"We were talking about a brother of mine."

"I see." I could see him thinking through the implications. I'm sure he got most or all of the puzzle figured out from there. "And you're really sure? You don't have to do this."

"Is that a serious question?"

He sighed. "I apologise. I don't doubt you. I doubt myself. And I see your state, and wonder..."

"Sil," I said. "Trust me. I have to do this."

"Let me ask you something," he said. "To clarify. For my own peace of mind."

“Alright.”

“You’re willing to take all these hardships upon yourself. And the toll on your conscience, regarding the consequences. You already know this is a serious matter.”

“Yeah. All of it.”

“And you know that long lifespans are taxing. More so with the burden on your conscience growing. You have other options.”

“It’s not an option without you. Haven’t we already settled that? We’ve been to the Shivering Isles, you know.”

He looked into my eyes. “At my decision. Is this still what you want? Truly?”

“Sil. Listen now. I’m not here as a subordinate. And you don’t want a subordinate, I know that much. Now let me take responsibility for something I want.”

His mustering gaze slowly turned into a smile. “You would be correct. And I should, shouldn’t I?”

“Yes, you should. Want to hear more?”

He halted, as if wondering what to say. Just when I started to wonder what had been difficult about that question in particular, he said, “I find I always want to hear more.”

I grinned. “Good. Then...” Suddenly I was self-conscious. But no backing down now. “I love you. And you’ve got no idea what that means. I told you in the beginning, and I’ll tell you again. Hasn’t changed with more awareness. Before you, I could never love anyone. I tried, but I couldn’t. I’d already accepted that it wasn’t meant for me. And now...”

“I know what it’s like. Except that I can’t even claim that I tried. I wasn’t interested enough to try, and I don’t like to waste my time.”

Made my heart race, still does thinking about it again. I raised my eyebrows.

He raised his in return. “Of course it’s you. What do you think?”

I kissed him. “Then...”

“Responsibility for what you want. What do you want? Truly? Humour me, even if I should know.”

Something occurred to me then. “Bad phase?”

“Somewhat.”

“I’ve left you alone for too long, haven’t I? Gave you time to brood.”

He cocked his head. “Perhaps.”

“Alright.” I tangled my fingers in his hair. “I’m keeping you. And I’ll do what I have to, to make it happen. I love you, and you’re mine, and I’m not letting you go. That’s what I want. Maybe we’ll be immortal together, and maybe we’ll die one day and move on together, but I’m keeping you in any case. And *if* we die, it won’t be to what you’re scared of. I’m not letting that happen to you. By principle. But the most important part is that you’re mine.” I paused, thinking over what I’d said there, then nodded. “Yeah. That alright?”

Finally he relaxed and met my gaze. “It is.”

“Settled?”

“Yes.” At last, he gave me a self-conscious smile, and I wrapped my arms around him and held on to him and felt my eyes fall shut almost immediately. Seemed those were my penultimate reserves.

These are the last ones.

I’m trembling, and my hand is shaking. I’m writing this because it’s important, and the sleep of exhaustion wipes out memory, but I shouldn’t be writing anymore, I should be sleeping.

I think I’ll sleep now. Yeah.

Chapter 61

We're still not back on Artaeum. I ended up mostly sleeping for a few days. Sil let the Psijics know there'd been a lot of Daedric activity involved, and I needed recovery. Both individually true, not actually linked, but people create the link themselves in their heads.

He does that quite a bit, I've noticed.

He spent the time in the usual ways and also doing his own research on the Summerset-related things I'd told him.

Then he asked if he could read my journal. Said he couldn't help being curious.

I was apprehensive, though I trust him and I tell him way too much anyway.

He said he also couldn't help missing my conversation when I was away or sleeping.

That did it, because of course it did. So I agreed. Warned him the beginning was less than diplomatic; he said with that little smile of his that he didn't expect anything else.

Warned him the latter part is pretty much only about him.

He asked, "And why do you think I would mind that?"

Gorgeous. Couldn't help but letting him, then.

I also asked if I could read his in return.

He said, "You did. Or parts of it. You're welcome to return anytime."

So the Planisphere.

He added that he'd never been one for keeping journals and was glad to have found a way to get that obligation out of the way.

I just had to smile at that. Then I asked him, "What if, in the far future, we're both still alive but not in Clockwork City anymore? Will you write one then? Or invent something new? What if we're travelling a lot? A pocket planisphere?"

He returned the smile. "You seem to enjoy writing. Why don't I leave it to you for the both of us?"

"You know. For all your talk of obligations, you have a way of passing things you don't enjoy to other people."

"Perhaps."

Unfortunately, adorable. Can't resist him. "That's fine," I said. "Once we make it to that state, I'll gladly do that."

"Good. That lightens a heavy worry about the future."

See, how could I resist that?

I'll admit I was nervous after all about him reading all of this. Almost couldn't fall asleep cause I wanted to watch his reactions, clarify anything he took objection to, and so on. He insisted I needed sleep, and in the end I slept.

I woke up eventually. Turned out I didn't have to worry at all. Turned out he liked what he read.

Turns out he's wonderful, too, but then I knew that.

...

Slept some more. Back awake. Right now he's working on constructing something. He won't say what it is. But I saw a tail.

...

Same game, back awake. The mystery construct? It's a verminous fabricant. A tame one. Like I'd mentioned wanting somewhere in the journal.

Well, tame to Sil and to me. Still viciously attacks anyone else. With just a bit of a Daedric essence mixed in. He told me to try summoning it. It works, even on the low energy I've got right now. (At least I've got some back by now.)

I don't know what to say. I love it.

But no more summoning, it was declared, because I need more rest. I really overdid it, didn't I? But that's alright. Everything is alright.

Chapter 62

While we were stuck at home, I asked Sil if he could locate a person someone had asked about. Someone important to them. Since he knows close to everything and otherwise has ways to find out. He didn't ask where I'd heard of him, and since I didn't specify, he probably already knew. A Lothryn Simero of House Telvanni. Restoration specialist, rogue as his Great House tends to be as a whole, apparently raised in Cyrodiil, currently possibly residing in Murkmire, otherwise in the east of Vvardenfell like most of them.

Sil said he'd look into it.

Now here's the interesting thing. After all possible research, it turns out there's no such person.

Chapter 63

Well! No use worrying about what we may have done there. The gears are already set in motion and so on.

I'm more or less restored, so back to Artaeum it was, and giving a proper status report to the Psijics. As expected, they're not excited about all the Daedra.

I get to do more investigating and following some traces.

You know

I suddenly don't feel well at all.

What is this, my body going on protest cause now there's magic around again? Reminds me of my earlier studies when I suddenly made a lot of headway. I was sick as a malnourished durzog for weeks.

I can't use this now. I've spent too much time away from this already. I mean, I spent the time away that I needed. But this also needs doing now.

Not well at all. Damn.

...

Sil says he won't do much more than alleviate some symptoms and help me sleep cause I need to adjust back on my own. Sensible but unpleasant. And I'm now grounded on Artaeum for a bit longer.

But, he says after that, the first few days of the investigation he'll come along to watch over me as long as we do the countryside part of it and he doesn't have to meet any Altmer politicians and religious dignitaries.

I readily agreed, time with him down there on regular old Nirn, nothing constructed or removed from the plane or whatever, is always special. And also, I wish I could make the same demand he did.

But for him I'll even shoulder meeting snobbish High Elves with pompous titles, and keep them away from him.

See, this is the extent of what I'm willing to do for you. Now you know I must really love you.

Chapter 64

Some notes on these past few days:

First, a note to myself: Shut up about indriks. He knows they're cute. But still. I love those things. By far my favourite inhabitants of Summerset.

And gryphons. The young are like kittens. I want to take all of those home. (And hopelessly wreck the fragile ecosystem, I know.) Fabricants? How about it?

My verminous fabricant is still cuter. I love the little guy.

Others don't quite as much.

Things that happened:

My fabricant tried to attack a fully-grown gryphon. Less like a kitten, that one. My fabricant didn't care.

The gryphon fled.

At some point we were talking to people, and I unsummoned my fabricant. Now, him being only a little bit Daedric-tinged for ease of summoning (and apparently that can be removed later once I've got more practice with non-Daedric summons, but right now it's best if I have as firm control as possible seeing as he's the kind to make gryphons flee), he has to go somewhere then. Currently, that somewhere is Sil's study on Artaeum.

Now, an unfortunate Psijic mage had the unfortunate idea of entering Sil's study unannounced to look for a book. Apparently, Sil had never minded that before.

This time, however, the room had a guardian. A very enthusiastic guardian.

The mage made it out alive, but he won't enter there in a while, I think.

Someone whose name I forgot tried to confront Sil about the creature, and even adding Daedric influence to it, and bringing it to Artaeum.

Sil just gave him that look, and said the creature was one of the lesser Daedric presences on the island.

And then he explained he'd made it because I'd "indirectly expressed an interest in replacing Daedric summons with something else," and this was practice.

The mage tried asking what he meant by Daedric presences, but Sil was done talking and wanted to go to his study, and that *means* he's done talking and wants to go to his study, so the conversation was cut very short.

He's the most capricious fatalist I've ever met.

And finally, speaking of Daedra: I think it would be more useful at this point to list the Princes and respective champions and favourites that *aren't* involved in this mess.

Peryite. Peryite is keeping to himself. Azura maybe, but you never know what strings she's pulling in the background. My late mother taught me never to underestimate that. Anyone else? Dagon?

I think I've made my point.

Not that I mind. We've met some fine people today.

Signed,

Salyn Darovi, Champion of Sheogorath, investigator for the Psijic Order, whose just slightly Daedric-tinged fabricant pet is upsetting people greatly, oh no, Daedric influence.

Chapter 65

I can't deal with these people.

Which ones?

Yes.

High Elves. Psijics. (The few Imperials are alright. But in this reality, I can't even talk to the talking skull or admit I know he exists.) Always disapproving of something. Sapiarchs. Daedric champions other than a very select few.

I'll be happy to be back home with the Apostles, and that should tell you enough. Everyone involved is insufferable.

Speaking of Daedric champions. Here's something that's been getting to me in addition to all the pompous and self-important disapproval of everyone else.

Don't you just love it when someone asks you for your opinion on a thing, pretends to go along with it, and then does the opposite, without telling you?

What in Oblivion for?

I told Naryu, I told her! Not happy to be right, in fact I'm fucking annoyed to be right. But still, I told her that girl was bad news and better taken out, for everyone involved.

And I'm not even going to say "What does she ask my opinion for at all if she's going to do her own thing anyway" cause sometimes you just want to hear different views and then decide on your own. Sure. Go ahead.

But why didn't she just say "No, actually I disagree"? What's so difficult about that? Why'd she have to go and act all depressed and pretend she thinks I'm right, and pretend to kill her, but then sneak her here, and now of course *I* get to deal with the damage, and *I'll* get to kill the girl eventually, and it had to be a surprise to that.

This is either really fucking stupid, or it's a very intricate assassination plan from someone who didn't want to do the killing herself. Hide the target, set her loose somewhere knowing she's going to snap again as usual and do something horrible as usual, wait for hero to take care of the problem.

And she'll probably get all depressed when I eventually have to tell her, too.

Fuck this. Fuck everyone. Fuck these islands. I want home.

I suppose we're done here.

I'd like to part on a conciliatory note, but sometimes that doesn't happen.

The people who are supposed to be dead are, and so are a few more who aren't supposed to be dead.

I suppose the order is tolerating me by and large; a few of them may even like me. Sadly, they're no comparison to the ones from the 'wrong' reality. Again, the Imperials are alright. A few more besides. That's as good as it gets for now.

We made some very worthwhile Daedric friends who are comically unexpected and unsuited to our life and natures in theory. In practice, they were the counter-balance to all the nonsense here that I needed. May be good for Sil, too. And I like them a lot.

Speaking of:

Sil is wonderful as always. Doesn't need saying, but feels wrong to omit all the same. There are things that propriety and a dedication to truthfulness just dictate irrevocably.

I also continue to love my fabricant. And Sil's just so pleased I like the fabricant and his species, it's the cutest thing in the world. Well, close to. He can get cuter still. But this is pretty damned cute.

Oh yeah. I knew I was forgetting something: The world and the autonomy of different planes of reality are saved. Yeah, you're welcome. Aren't you all happy you had so many Daedric Princes and their champions on the side of good and justice?

Maybe that's part of why some of the Psijics are so difficult about me; we were too good and useful, and they managed increasingly little as events went on. Well. We also messed up a whole lot, but let's not think about that now. The people who are supposed to be dead are dead, and Nocturnal at least got a temporary slap on the wrist, and sometimes that's the best anyone can do and a better result than anyone could expect.

Except for Sil. He gave me and us minuscule chances and as a result expected success.

You know. It's nice to be trusted. He does that. Recent events involving former acquaintances just drove home how much I value that.

There, if that isn't a conciliatory note, I don't know what is, and so I should stop writing right here.

Chapter 67

We're home.

Finally.

A new entry in the Clockwork City archives

Look, I've figured it out!

Let's see if this actually gets entered into the city archive for public access.

In which case I should end this in a fitting way, shouldn't I?

By the words I wind the gears.

Another entry in the Clockwork City archives, edited several times

An Address to Lord Seht

By Salyn Darovi, No Title

Darling, you know I love you, and I love the city, and I even love the factotums. I do.

But do you think you could set them so they don't attack me all the time when I'm running around the warded-off areas? I know they're trying to do their work and to protect whatever's in there, and anyone not authorised is a hostile entity, but I distract *you* from your work without repercussions, so distracting a factotum from sweeping the floor should also be permitted. Different order of magnitude and so on.

Not to mention they get more distracted by having to attack me and then me having to dismantle them, which I don't want to do cause they're yours and I don't want to harm them, than if they just continued sweeping, or keeping watch or whatever they're doing. Easily solved by just letting me pass.

Unless I count as a potential threat, but you know I'd never hurt you, right?

Or is it impossible to set up without disturbing major functions? In which case, I guess, have them carry on, and I'll try not to aggravate too many of them while I'm doing my own work around the city.

Yours most faithfully,

Salyn

A Response to Salyn Darovi, No Title

Are you posing me a challenge?

A Response to Lord Seht

Only if you want.

A Response to Salyn Darovi, No Title

Always so concerned about that.

A Response to Lord Seht

Always.

You're precious. You're the most precious entity in all of reality, so you'll have to pry that concern from my cold dead hands, which will be difficult seeing as I'm immortal.

A Response to Salyn Darovi, No Title

I'll see what I can do.

Meanwhile, will you face some more aggressive factotums to come see me in the Cogitum Centralis? I find myself wishing for your company.

A Response to Lord Seht

I'll be right there.

By the words I wind the gears.

Chapter 70

Of course he knew all the time what Zanon and I were doing with the factotum research, and of course he didn't say a word. (He's impossible, and I love him.)

Good thing, too; I had fun and did learn a lot; after all I'm coming from a position of not knowing the first thing about factotum building. For a not-so-gifted Apostle and a completely clueless non-Apostle, I think we did pretty well, practice model or no.

But enough of that now, I've taken a liking to this one so I've taken him home, and there shall be no more dissembling and more company instead. Zanon doesn't want him, and passed him on to me, and I co-built him, not to mention gathered all those parts, so he's rightfully mine now.

However, next time we're meeting Vivec, I have questions.

This is alright, isn't it?

Sil wouldn't have let me run around doing this and listened to my gushing about factotum building while keeping a straight face, all while knowing me, without expecting this, right?

Am I worrying too much again?

Add-on:

It's alright, and the Precursor's staying, and Sil looks pleased with the outcome.

What's more, he just read this, and lowered the journal in his hand, and looked at me, and said, "Truth is, I like your worries."

This is good. All of this is so good.

While I'm writing this and grinning like an idiot, Sil's looking over the factotum and the fabricant and the other things we're assembling, and saying "I never thought so, but perhaps we should consider a larger living space."

I say, "Anywhere with you is good," and I mean it.

He smiles and is already off in thought, re-emerges, says, "I have something I never finished. It was too much space just for myself, and I never saw myself sharing anything with anyone. So I abandoned it and stayed in my rooms here. But you might like it."

More later. Can't write, must embrace gorgeous imposter god who says impossibly touching things. Priority setting very high.

Chapter 71

Sil had that faraway look again, the one where I know he's working on something, not to be confused with the one where he's calculating or comparing futures for preferability. With the working-on-something look, I normally let him work and don't disturb him.

Which can be a feat of willpower when he's sitting in bed wrapped in blankets, cup of water in his hand but forgotten, hair a mess. There aren't words enough to describe what that look does to me, but I seem to be trying anyway in this journal.

I was good, though. Except for forgetting what I was doing and watching him, but that's got to be allowed.

Eventually, he emerged, looked at me, tiniest smile at first, then serious. "You should not have any more problems with the factotums."

"You already did that?" I sat down next to him trying to sort the questions in my head. "Which ones?"

"All of them."

"All...?"

"All the ones in Clockwork City, at least. I cannot give any guarantees for any mainland factotums that I may have no influence over. But you won over the scattered first era one on your own. Perhaps this won't pose a problem for you in the long run." Another tiny smile, and back to serious.

I cocked my head. Beautiful, and generous. But there was something more here. "Thank you." I took his hand and kisses his fingers.

"Salyn..."

I watched him. By Oblivion, he was beautiful. But he was being exceedingly grave about something that, to someone with his abilities, could have been just a small good-natured favour. So what was it?

"Is there a downside?" I asked. Perhaps appearances? Or a security risk if others saw me get past them? "Are they compromised if the wrong people see? Maybe you can make it so they don't go docile in the wrong company, or..."

He looked at me curiously. "You would like them aggressive sometimes?"

"I don't know. I don't know what you're thinking. But you're thinking something. Personally, I'd want them calm around me, but if that's a problem for you, then we go by what's better for you."

He blinked. Smiled. Seemed to think through his response. At last, he said, "You were right in what you asked. Despite the insolent way in which you asked." He leaned in, lowered his voice, "But you were right in that, too."

I closed the distance and kissed him, wrapped my arms around him, pulled him closer, nearly forgot the conversation.

He let himself be pulled and sat closer to me, but then stopped me and looked at me, in thought. “I am wondering how to phrase this.”

Cold fear clenched me, and he saw of course, and stroked my hair out of my face. “It isn’t anything for you to worry about. Only, perhaps, for me.”

Those are some of the most interesting conversations, when he gets like that. I gave him a quick kiss and then sat back and let him talk.

He found his start at last. “Should you find yourself in a situation in which you want the factotums to show aggression, you can tell them.”

“Tell them... A switch off mechanic for the behaviour? And they’ll listen?”

“They will.”

“Is it a specific phrase?”

“It isn’t. Simply tell them what you want. Just try to be clear.” A little smile. “They’re less complex and a lot more literal than your Daedra. It can be a challenge for Apostles, too, when put in charge of factotums, or for new owners of singular ones.”

“I’ve seen those out on the streets. There’s that shop keeper...”

“Just like that.”

I let it sink in. “What if I get it wrong?”

“They’ll do what they perceive your command to be. So be careful. Or don’t be, if chaos is what you’re trying to achieve.” A hint of a smile.

I returned it, and thought about it some more. “So if I’ve turned them aggressive, can I turn them back to calm again, is that part of the command set?”

“Yes and no.”

I leaned in. “You speak in riddles, my love.”

There was a pause. Maybe thinking whether to say the next part. Eventually, he did. “Yes, in that that is something you can command. No, in that there is no set of commands.”

“There is no...” I frowned. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“What am I saying?”

I grinned and ran my hand through his tangled hair. “Are you saying I can just command anything, and they’ll listen?”

“They will.”

I stalled the movement, left my hand there, curled my fingers into his pretty hair. “And you said all of them? In the city?”

“That’s also what I said.”

The implications took a while to settle in my mind. Overwhelming. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“But perhaps I did. Are you complaining?”

“Not in the slightest, I...” I leaned in to kiss him again. “I can’t thank you enough, but... Are you sure?”

“As with all things, I did not have a category for what you are before you entered my life. There was no space and no precedent. So I had to create a new category.” His hand gestured towards somewhere out there, the city, life, could have been anything. Perhaps it was. “And so it was with the factotums.”

“That category is very... You’re sure it’s not too much?”

“I’m sure. It only reflects reality.” He looked into my eyes, and I felt vertigo would take me. “Do you accept?”

“Of course I accept.”

Then a note of humour entered his features. “I trust you only to abuse your privileges in ways I like or don’t mind.”

I grinned. “You know it.” But... “But what if I get it wrong? You know I worry.”

“I know,” he said in that matter-of-fact tone he gets. “I would have added: And in the occasional case, in ways I can forgive. But the truth is that I would forgive you anything, so that part is redundant.” As if he was explaining me another factotum function. But his eyes were on me.

I was speechless, but I had to say something, so the obvious first: “I won’t abuse that either. You...” I stumbled over my words there. “You can afford to tell me that.”

He gave me a real smile at last. “I know.”

A simple statement. Simple, to the point, and deadly.

A new entry in the Clockwork City archives

A Compilation of Nordic Drinking Songs

Published by Salyn Darovi, No title

For the Clockwork City Archives

Filed under: Tamriel culture, Music, Poetry, Oral Tradition, Adages and Cultural Wisdom, History

[...]

Entry in the Clockwork City archives

Urgent edict

To the immediate attention of all citizens and anyone else loitering on the premises

By Salyn Darovi, No title

Leave the brassilisks alone.

Anyone caught harming a brassilisk except in self-defence will meet swift justice, and we all know brassilisks don't attack anyone, so good luck convincing anyone that it was self-defence.

That's all.

Chapter 74

Sil's working on one of the big complicated projects. The kind that keeps him in the Cogitum Centralis for days, weeks, with only minuscule interruptions, and taking up his thoughts even then.

He did warn me. I said I understood, and the work was important, and I support him and all that, and while I meant it, I'm also pining like a starved abandoned puppy. I knew this would happen. Didn't realise how bad it was.

So the only thing to keep me alive: work and studies.

I'm getting more natural at using the archive. Messing with it is less fun when he's not around to react, and I feel I've taken sufficient care of my reputation for the time being, so I've been wondering what to put there in serious instead. So damned much is already there. What can I even contribute? I'm not in the mood for scathing criticisms of the Tribunal, not when I'm longing for one of them and feeling like an empty husk without him.

I've already broken my own rule and mentioned the dragon breaks in my journal, and once you've done it, there's no reason to walk backwards across the boundary you've crossed, but neither is there a reason to overdo it and do the writing in public. Especially while things are still pending.

Conjuration.

It's a little early to talk to anyone but Sil about my self-doubt about the topic, that's for when I'm well-established in something else and can look back on it as a folly of youth that I grandly got over. Right now, I'm still practicing with my fabricant. The Daedric aspect has been lessened, and I'm doing well. Next time Sil has a moment that's not taken up by his project, I'll have to ask him to remove it altogether, so I can practice that. Can't be proud of myself until I've managed it completely without the concessions.

Oh who am I kidding, next time Sil has a moment like that, the last thing on my mind will be the fabricant.

Can't let my thoughts wander too far there, or it gets unbearable, and I'll just feel sorrier for myself.

No, fuck it, it's already unbearable, and I feel plenty sorry for myself.

At first, I tried doing a lot of busy work for the city dwellers, fetching stuff from the dangerous areas for slum dwellers and so on, now that it's easier for me and most things don't attack me. But of course that reminds me of when he made it so, and the time surrounding that, and I'm lost in thought and longing and the unbearableness of it all again.

I even tried working with Apostles on research. Terribly fascinating stuff still. But you see, it's his, and I love it, and so it's great and terrible and all too much. Besides, if I can't complain to him about the Apostles at night, working with them can be a bit much, too.

See, even my attempts at cutting down the sentimentality are half-baked.

I'm no good like this.

You know, whatever it is he's working on, it surely can wait.

No, it probably can't. He wouldn't have gone into this phase if he thought it could. I know he misses me too, even after a few hours; I know I'm not alone. I just feel like it cause I'm lonely and feeling sorry for myself.

But you see, on the other hand, now *my* work is suffering, and I've got a contribution to make for this city, too, or he wouldn't have given me all these privileges and possibilities and all this license, right? He has to be able to rely on me, too.

The people have to be able to rely on me.

Like this, nobody can.

So if I disturb him, this is really in the interest of Clockwork City itself and Nirn-Ensuing as a whole.

A ridiculous argument if I've ever heard or fabricated one, but one of my licenses does include the declaration of states of emergency.

Have I gotten anything useful done today?

Yesterday?

I've summoned and unsummoned my fabricant a few times. Then I've thought about the time Sil gave him to me, and the time he woke us in the middle of the night because he had to guard us from a dovah-fly, and the time he was just lying on the floor a bit like a sleeping guar or clannfear and I pointed out to Sil how cute he was and Sil looked so happy I liked him and it almost broke my heart in a good way, and...

You know what, this is hopeless. I can't do this any longer. I'll be back, hopefully not too soon. Wish me luck, journal.

Chapter 75

What can I say that's not too indiscreet? I still have my scruples when it's about him; despite this being my journal, these things are never quite as private as one'd want them to be. I've read entirely too many people's journals to believe we take our words to the grave, and for someone quasi-immortal like me, that'd be too many words without a grave, and too many chances for the words to end up anywhere but in obscurity.

Aforementioned reading including, I should add, journals added to the Clockwork City archives by enthusiastic archivists. (Entertaining, for sure, but I'm not convinced all the authors were looking for that kind of fame.)

In any case.

I've regained some peace of heart and mind, and so has he.

Turned out the interruption was both welcome and awaited; should have figured, really. He even spelled it out with unusual frankness. Giving in to me and my wishes is easier than his own, and is something he has incorporated into his codex as an acceptable concession to mortal nature, which after all is precious. Always glad to oblige.

He spoke of new dreams, too. Of when this is all over. For him to dare to dream of that, and express it, that's impressive enough. For his dreams to be not for others or an abstract goal but for himself, for us, and then for him to explicitly ask me if I'd grant him that. I don't know what to say. Except of course, yes, everything and anything, and I want the same, and I won't rest until we have it, and an ever-growing list of endearments.

So the usual, but more so.

He said he was almost done but he needed the distraction as much as I did, and after he's finished, he wants us to go visit Vivec because he has Tribunal business to talk about but didn't want to waste time now elaborating, which I very much agreed with.

He also stated he didn't have to ask me whether I'd rather stay back here on my own, and I clung to him and barely let him continue, which was the expected answer. So we're visiting Vvardenfell sometime soon on who knows what business.

Either something serious, or a pretext because he wants a vacation and feels uneasy and/or guilty about it, or a bit of both. Probably that one.

He did get around to removing the Daedric aspect entirely from my fabricant sometime when I was asleep in the past few days and he wasn't. With the result that now I can't summon him. Guess I was depending on that little Daedric concession more than I cared to realise. Well, the challenge is on now. Once I can think of anything concerning summoning again, or of anything not directly concerning Sil for that matter. Currently impossible.

Chapter 76

I was expecting a lot from the visit to Vivec, but not for the Tribunal business Sil wanted to talk about to be actual straight-forward Tribunal business.

We got to the old countryside hideout, and settled in, and you could tell Vivec was waiting for Sil to start talking about whatever it was he actually wanted to talk about. I can read the signs now cause I know them from myself. We both know what it's like. (Camaraderie and understanding with Vivec, what has the world come to?)

When he decided it was time, Sil led with the words "I don't intend to die."

Knows how to get the undivided attention sometimes. (Always knows how to get mine, or doesn't have to know how to get it, he just has it, but this kind is different.)

Went on to say they have to do better, there has been an amassing of crises and discontent, their prime is over, they'll steadily lose ground from now on, and it's time to do better to gain more time. And the first way was to do better with the subjects.

Then he said he'd stumbled across something in the scripture and started paying closer attention to the literature and regulations, and some things couldn't stay standing, and then he proceeded to take all this stuff apart and picking at phrasings and rules, "This is pointlessly cruel", "You can't be serious about this", and so on.

No details here; if there are to be reforms, you don't endanger them by spilling anything too soon or any origins.

Just this, I could have listened to him for hours – well, it *was* hours, but it could have been *more* hours.

At some point Vivec pointed out, "You didn't use to care about any of this for... as long as it has been."

"I didn't," Sil said, as if the topic was done with that.

Vivec looked to me. "My brother used to be easier to handle. I strongly suspect I have you to blame."

No need to be modest. "You're probably right to."

"Thank you," he simply said and turned back to Sil. "But these things are not as easy as you imagine them. There are many factors to consider."

Sil raised an eyebrow.

I grinned. You don't tell him he doesn't know how to consider complex things.

Vivec sighed. "Let's think about this in depth then. One by one. And we should involve our sister. It's time." He leaned forward, just a bit, as if conspiratorially. "Do you know what she said when I told her about you two?" He sat up in an exaggeratedly rigid posture. "All these years, and *now* he starts acting like a normal person?"

Sil gave a cautious, thoughtful smile.

“Is that approval from her?” I asked.

“More so than in all these years she evokes,” said Sil. “It is disapproval, but I give her something concrete to disapprove of for once. It’s an improvement.”

“Always happy to oblige.”

Chapter 77

So Sil and Vivec wanted to have a private talk, which is reasonable enough. I'm already impressed at how much they involved me in their regal business.

"Going to talk about me?" I asked.

Sil smiled that mysterious little smile. "Perhaps, in passing. But nothing you have to worry about."

I grinned. "That was a joke, you know."

He leaned in. "I know. I may still talk about you." Kissed me, and left. This is what I put up with.

So I decided to use my time in Tamriel productively and build another time portal to try and reach Riacil in the hope that he was done with Coldharbour.

And he was. I found him in Mournhold in his timeline. Decided to visit while I was at it. I had enough reserves for that; stays with Vivec always mean I don't have to use my magic for anything. The advantages of imposter gods that like to show off.

Riacil looked rougher round the edges, gaunter, face got a few new lines, harder look in his eyes. But those eyes still lit up when he saw me, and he flung his arms around me and told me I'd been one of the things that got him through Coldharbour. Then he froze and muttered, "Are you the right one?"

Still him.

I ruffled his hair, shorter now, and he's wearing those horns I've last seen on Clavicus Vile, which I complimented, and assured him I was the right one.

He grinned and stepped back and looked me over and grinned more. "You won't believe... So have you ever wondered what's up with the version of you in my timeline?"

"I'll admit I have."

"Almalexia showed me. You're a lady. Saliyah Darovi. House Dres, Daedra expert, saved Vvardenfell and now Clockwork City, and you just won yourself Sotha Sil." Then he frowned. "That *is* who you're with, too, isn't it? I didn't misread you and you're actually courting Vivec? Though that'd be funny."

"Hold on."

He grinned.

"Almalexia. Almalexia showed you..."

"I tried to get her help for the Molag Bal business. Still not done there, we have the amulet, but they're stalling. I can't get more than her blessing, but she told me someone has to die and I should decide who it is or... She says if I don't make the decisions, I'll end up being the sacrifice next time."

Now that was some news to *almost* overshadow the other one. “She’ll have been talking about Nerevar. Telling you not to make his mistake. Now be careful, I know I’m a hypocrite, but don’t get too close to her, or you *will* be making the same mistake as Nerevar.”

He laughed. “Oh, no, that’d be weird. And I already hit on Meridia by mistake, now that was embarrassing.”

“You did what?”

“I didn’t get who she was! She pretended to be a Breton and called herself the Groundskeeper, and I was lonely, so...”

“The Groundskeeper.” I sighed. “Riacil...”

“I know, alright? Anyway, she shot me down, and good thing, too.”

I burst out laughing at that. “And there I was worrying you wouldn’t make things interesting on your end. Forgive me for my lack of faith.”

“You’re making fun of me.”

“Just a little. Anyway. Yeah, it’s Sil I’m with. Not Vivec. Not... No. Really not. But... A lady?”

“Good-looking, too!” he said. “A lot like you now. Just more...” He made a universal gesture indicating curves.

“I don’t know what to make of that.”

“Your other you knows, though. Actually she wears a lot of the kinds of suits you do, just... fills them out a little differently.”

“I...” I shook my head. “I’ll have to process that. So... Why was Almalexia showing you that anyway?”

“It was a weird conversation, I just wanted help, she talked about being stretched thin between all their crises, and then she mentioned you, and – you know I can’t lie well, I showed I recognized you or the concept of you and then the name, and then I ended up spilling a lot.”

“So she was fishing for information.”

“Yeah,” he admitted. “But I predicted your relationship and you being trustworthy, so she seems relieved. Seems she wants her brother to be a normal person. Oh, did you know, at least that version, never has any lovers, just cares about his machines and...”

“I’m learning the members of the Tribunal all gossip about each other equally, and in all realities. And yeah, I know.”

He just grinned at me.

I had to laugh. “In any case. So... You defended me? Thanks. Or... her, really. My other... Yeah.”

“Both of you. I only know you but I said it doesn’t matter. I said you’re loyal to all three of them despite the bark, and not to worry about Sil, and...” He cleared his throat, looked down. “And I said you’re the person I trust most in the world.”

What do you say to that? I tried with “Thanks,” but it got stuck in my throat, and I hugged him

instead, probably awkwardly.

He clung to me again anyway.

I'll have to watch over him, definitely.

"So, Meridia and Almalexia," I said, "you like them difficult, don't you?"

"It's not like that," he protested. "I mean, it was with the one before I knew she's Meridia. I tried but I wouldn't have if I'd known. If they were mortal, maybe."

"Don't like gods or Daedra or imposter gods?"

"Not like..." He faltered. "It'd be wrong and weird. If they're mortal, that's one thing. But I can't hit on a different god than the one I worship, I mean..."

"That's what I did," I pointed out. "It'd be weird if... Now you've given me a mental image I didn't need. Sheogorath? Absolutely not. Now *that* kind of relationship would be weird and wrong. Sil's not a god to me, that's why it works."

"I just feel like... If I was to hit on a god, then it should be... I don't know what I'm saying, nevermind."

I raised an eyebrow. His face was still buried against my chest, so he didn't see. Maybe a good thing, at that. But I had to say something after all. "Perhaps you should give that some thought."

"That's not... I can't..." His face was still conspicuously hidden.

"I bet you're blushing right now."

He gave a frustrated groan and moved away from me. Yeah, blushing. "Why do you do this to me?"

"Cause I like you and you're my brother. And just in case."

He sighed. "So, who did you kill?"

I blinked at the change of topic. "Ah. Out of them? Sai."

"Sai?"

"No good reason. There's no good reason for that in any way. Lyris was my friend, and we drank mead together. Varen I felt sorry for, and... He was this melancholy guy that hated himself way too much, and I thought he should live to get another chance. See the world and himself differently again. Sai I didn't get that close with. And he was... Well, a warrior. And very... straightforward. It's not that I disliked him, but we just didn't connect."

Riacil nodded. "And Abnur?"

"Took himself and me out of the options right away cause we were needed for the ritual and defeating Molag Bal. We were the mages, and I was the soulless one. But I wouldn't have anyway, we got along. Something about being untrustworthy mages who dealt in Daedric things. And we didn't get in the way of each other's politics." I started to feel the habitual dizziness of having stayed too long in another reality.

"Similar then," Riacil said. "And... Damn it, I want to catch up on so much."

“So do I. But I’m getting weak, so I should get back before I get stuck here. Let me just tell you a few big ones before I go.”

He nodded.

“I got the dragon break started. With the help of the third one, the third soulless one, I mean. Guess who it is.”

He blinked. “Tythis.”

“Who?”

“My banker. Well, more than a banker. He’s a necromancer I met in Coldharbour, but he’s also a banker, and I think he lacks a soul, too, and by Lorkhan he’s strong, you’ve got to see him...”

Now that was a new development. “I’ll have to meet him, but no. So. In my reality, and in hers, Abnur has a wife. Who’s a necromancer, too, while we’re at it, but also a Psijic mage...”

His face lit up. “Diesala!”

“You know her? He never brought her around or even mentioned her name till I met him on Artaeum.”

“I’m more trustworthy than you.”

“Can’t deny that,” I said.

“So she’s... She did what we did? Really?”

“As I said. Necromancer and Psijic. She talked her Loremaster into helping us. Something between sentimentality and saving Sil, who’s their honorary member and mentor, and... She made me sound like a villain of epic proportions who’d always cause this, and it’s better for their order to control the damage and work with me, as in the version that was there and willing to work with them.”

He burst out laughing. “I can see it. You have that aura.”

“Do I really?”

“You absolutely do. So... That’s a lot, but I’ll let it sink in later. What now?”

“Now we wait. Something happens, and it should trigger. I don’t know what.”

“Huh.”

“Alright, I should go. I’m hitting my limit, I think...”

“Wait! You said interesting...”

I cocked my head.

“You should know this. Before you go. You mentioned doing something interesting with my reality. So I got rather attached to Vanus, and...”

I grinned. “Your list is growing, isn’t it?”

He grinned back. “That’s not the point here. The point is, I had this vision, from Lorkhan, about what’d happen to Vanus if Mannimarco lived, and then I thought things through, with him being a necromancer and Molag Bal probably wanting vengeance and all, and then we got Chim-el Adabal and did this *thing*, and now... Mannimarco is gone. From our reality, I think. Thought you’d want to know that. That’s more interesting than hitting on Meridia, right?”

I’ll admit my thoughts went blank there for a moment. “Well, by Oblivion, that really is.”

He gave a little bow.

I felt myself getting faint and hurried our goodbyes, and returned to my reality.

I’m writing this down so I don’t forget any facts, these trips can muddle things in my head.

Time to process all of his information, too. Then time to wait.

And, as so often: What in Oblivion, Riakil?

Where were you when the dragon broke?

Let me tell you where I was.

I was in Vvardenfell in a countryside hideout owned by Vivec; I won't specify where exactly cause it's a hideout.

I was in an upstairs room with Sil, awkwardly trying to explain that in our meeting Riakil had said my alternate self from his timeline was a lady, and trying to ask if he'd still want me if I was, too, or in case the dragon break went through and that reality won out.

He assured me it didn't matter, it just had to be me.

He asked about the reverse case, and I assured him of the same, and that he was perfect no matter which way, and he said so was I, and I was very relieved, and then said, "This is one of those conversations not many couples have, isn't it?"

He smiled, and looked off into the space of his thoughts, and before he could say anything more, reality cracked, and light flooded in through edges and tears that weren't there before, and all my senses were assaulted.

"Fucking..." A primal panic gripped me, didn't matter that this was my idea and a lot of my work. When this happens, you're terrified. So I held on to him, cause that was the only thing that made sense to do. "Don't let go of me," I whispered. "Don't let go, no matter what."

He didn't, and I saw and sensed some of those inexplicable things Riakil sometimes tries to talk about.

Then I lost consciousness.

I woke up on the floor still holding on to Sil, who was watching me with a new expression.

I looked around. It was obvious enough what had happened. We were still in the same room, though. It was quiet.

He ran a hand through my hair. "Salyn."

I smiled at last. "Yes, my love?"

He returned the smile faintly, then had a distracted look. "Salyn."

So something serious? "What's it?"

"I don't see a future. It's gone."

Chapter 79

Too much to sort out, too much happening, no time to sort my thoughts. So I've given up on chronicling all this.

Just a few things.

Sil's near-omniscience has settled into place again, but it's a lot patchier about the future now, and there's nothing he sees defined about himself now, and of course that's overwhelming, but also, he's so excited and giddy at this, I've never seen him quite like this. I'll treasure this forever, and I'll treasure him forever, and I'll make all the more sure this works in our favour in the end. This is just a start. A precondition, meaning anything we do now actually has a chance of succeeding. But that's something. Just can't let up now.

He's also been really appreciative, and no complains about that either. (By Oblivion, he's gorgeous.)

Vivec seemed a lot more unsettled at this.

Interestingly, Sil didn't let on to our (or rather my) direct involvement in the dragon break, so I didn't either.

We visited Artaeum to help sort matters; they have their hands full right now. It seems they got a mix of memories and backgrounds there, and unsurprisingly Diesala has the memories of the soulless one I worked with. Abnur is the matching one. Celarus is her version, too. Many are closer to Diesala's version of things, meaning they had an idea, and have a friendlier disposition towards me, too, than the ones I'd dealt with during the Summerset crisis. Seems she managed to soften them up to mortal concerns and passions more than any other version of her did. A few less in her close circle seemed caught cold entirely by this and are panicking. (Naturally.)

Diesala herself had a breakdown when it seemed Lothryn might not exist now cause he didn't exist in our timeline, and we'd messed up not checking closely enough in advance, cause who expects that kind of thing? But she located him in Black Marsh after all, and went on a short visit. So he exists now. In our now-shared reality, that is. He always existed for her. Interesting. We brought someone in.

Now that she's back, she insists Sil and I have to meet him. And that he's probably going to end up immortal, and he'll need immortal friends, and he's an isolated mage whose only friends he could name were her and a guy he used to buy slaves from, but now he stopped, so only her. Turns out that guy's my cousin Kalathys.

Anyway, we agreed to meet him if she wanted. Sil's in a good mood and more ready to say yes to that kind of thing than usual. Usually everything merely social is a distraction and not essential and so he has no time for that.

I need to find Riakil. Windhelm it is, this time. So that's next.

Chapter 80

Found him. Finally. Really good to see my brother and not have to leave so soon. And to know he's just here now. Same reality. That's a luxury we've never had before.

What really struck me was how he looks up to me, and what image of me he must have in his head. I feel like a fraud.

I've heard little siblings can be like that, but that's never how it was at home; Miziah could be sweet but would also snipe at me about being irresponsible and impractical and fairly useless all around, which from her point of view is correct. She was the reliable one that handled the real and the practical matters, and I never disabused her of that notion.

So now this... I don't know what to say.

Chapter 81

Home. I missed my fabricant.

Left him at home cause I couldn't summon and unsummon him, and I didn't want to spook the Psijics any more at this somewhat challenging time in their lives that I'd none-too-indirectly contributed to. Show some goodwill, and all that.

I swear he was happy to see me. Yes I know he's made of mostly metal, but it barely makes a difference once you get used to most life forms around you being either metal or part metal.

Sil reached around me, brushed my hand, pet the fabricant. I'm going to die someday from how he is and what he does, definitely.

"Would you like to know what you're missing?" he asked. Still so close to me. Impossible to take.

"I've missed being home alone with you two," I said.

He smiled. "I know that. I did, too. Besides that."

"You can teach me?"

"Of course." He sat down next to me, and the fabricant lay its head in his lap.

"I understand that notion," I told the fabricant. "Though I'm jealous now."

Sil laughed and leaned against my shoulder, expecting me to hold him and get him comfortable. Of course I did.

"The study of conjuration in Tamriel is very limited," he began in earnest. "For various reasons, some of them good ones. But the fact remains that the limitation to Daedra is an artificial one."

"Now you have my full attention," I said. He was warm against me, and so sweet and familiar. "With what you're saying, too," I amended.

He turned to shoot me a smile, then leaned back again, looking up at the ceiling. "You've been commanding factotums in the city a few times."

"Small things I've tried. I know, I could have been more specific about where the one should have gotten the tea from..."

He smiled again and reached up, ran his hands through my hair. "Don't worry about that. Now where is the difference to commanding Daedra? Other than the Daedra understanding your meaning more implicitly?"

"That is the difference," I said. "Or a symptom of the difference, isn't it? Factotums listen to speech. With Daedra it was my will, from my mind. That's more direct, and harder to misinterpret. And it exerts a stronger force. If I tell a factotum to come here, it still has to walk all the way to me. I can summon a Daedra, and they're bound to appear right next to me."

He nodded. "And would you say the average factotum is more wilful and difficult to control than the average Dremora?"

That made me think, made my mind run through all kinds of facts and speculations and scenarios. “I could say yes, by experience, and judging by the frustrated attempts I see on the streets every day, but...”

He grinned, and I returned it, but time for the serious answer.

The serious answer had to do with controlling these machine beings with their intelligent core with simply my willpower and the power of my mind, via magic. Something close to what he did, wasn't it?

“You're teaching me some very advanced and very dangerous things, aren't you?”

“Advanced, yes. Dangerous...” He cocked his head slightly, looked at me. “You've reverse-fabricated a time breach. Not knowing what it was and taking it for a faulty portal. Then you created variations on your own. As an end result, we're now living in a time after a dragon break. I doubt I could make you more dangerous.”

He gave me a knowing smile that sent shivers all over me and compelled me to return it.

“What I can do,” he continued, “is trust you and make you more efficient in your new home. Would you like that?”

Almost made me speechless, but I still found some fragment of my voice. “You know I would. Always.”

“Then let's begin. First, you simply have to let go of some preconceived biases. This should be easy for you.”

And as he does, with a proclamation of faith he makes it so.

(To be continued in detail in my research journal.)

So, what happened lately?

Through a convoluted chain of events and requests and family obligations, we met Lothryn sooner than expected. And he's one of the good Telvanni, the kind I like.

We met in one of the shadiest cornerclubs I've ever seen, locked-up and secretive with an almost cultish aura. I shouldn't expect anything else from a Telvanni mage; even the good ones have a high tolerance for the inner darkness in a mer and a propensity for getting bored.

Apparently, it was all a humorous coincidence caused by his using the place as an information network, and then one thing led to another, and he was using the back room as a prayer room.

But I've been around people a bit. It takes a certain kind to choose that kind of place as an information central and to initiate prayer there as if it was a library or a temple or a friendly Breton tavern with a bard and freshly baked bread. Many people not of that kind would walk in, be uncomfortable, and leave again, instead of going to the trouble of befriending the innkeeper. (None of us know the innkeeper's name cause nobody is allowed to know anyone's name. Yeah.)

Also there's a perfectly normal cornerclub just at the other end of town in an Argonian style building. Could have picked that one. But no. He didn't. I'm on to you, Lothryn.

In any case, Lothryn's invited to our city for the future cause we both like him. (Never said shady was a bad thing; I'm not that much of a hypocrite.)

Chapter 83

Here's what I haven't written so far, and I may destroy it later if it makes me uneasy to have it on paper after all:

Right after first meeting Lothryn, Sil took me to one of the high security chambers and locked us in.

"Can you keep a secret?" he asked. "From everyone. I will only be telling you. Not the person in question. Not even Vivec. *Especially* not Vivec, nor Almalexia. Can you do the equivalent?"

I didn't expect that. But I nodded. "Always."

He nodded, looked aside, tried to settle his hands. As he does. Then he looked at me, with a haunted look I don't often see on him, and said, "I'm very sure I met Nerevar."

Chapter 84

As seems to be a frequent habit these days, Sil locked us into a secured chamber for disseminating news again.

“I have a few things to report from communication I got today. I’m thinking of the order in which to tell you.”

I smiled. “Any will do. Is there a threat? Put that first.”

“There is a threat, but the Psijic order seems to have it under control. Reality was left unstable in some places after your efforts, which is to be expected, and they warned us to stay here in Clockwork City and ‘not do anything too exciting’ for a while, to allow them to work on stabilisation. We should follow that.”

I grinned, “I guess that warning goes mostly to me?”

“You do have a way of disrupting things. Now, the other two pieces of news. I’ll start with... No, I will start with the less substantial one. It doesn’t affect us directly, but you may find it amusing anyway.”

“Go ahead.”

“It appears that our mutual friend Divayth Fyr has found love recently. I’ll let you guess with whom.”

“Really?”

“Really. It’s not as unlikely as it was for me. But as you can imagine, he’s difficult to get along with.” His smile was conspiratorial. “I recall a number of very hostile severance situations. But he’s finally found a match.”

I’m telling you, paper, get the Tribunal to gossip, and you hear the funniest things. “Interesting, interesting, let’s see... If it’s him... They’re either brilliant and remarkable and a real match for him, or really stupid.”

Sil burst out in laughter, then said, “The first.”

“Hold on.”

“You figured it out? It happens to be our mutual acquaintance, Nerevar. Neither has any idea about that fact, and neither of us will tell them.”

“Two legendary Telvanni mages,” I said. “Something save us. But you know, it makes sense. In the time I’ve known Divayth, he’s spoken well, without reservation, about only two people. You as his old friend, and Nerevar. And he seemed to be a bit biased towards the latter, actually, though he put on a show of neutrality.”

Sil looked surprised for a moment. “You noticed.” He nodded. “That’s how it is. Divayth will figure it out first. He doesn’t like being outshone, but they’ll manage.”

“How did they meet anyway?”

He shot me a mischievous smile. “A certain cornerclub in Black Marsh.”

“Knew it.”

Tribunal and gossip. Seriously.

“As for the third news,” he said, “this again relates to the instability of reality we’re having.” He peered at me. “As you know, memories can get confused in these phases.”

“Yeah.”

“And as you know, Riakil’s reality had you as a woman.”

“I’m not sure what to make of where this is going.”

He smiled. “I got a prayer from your sister today. She said, ‘Lord Seht, hate to bother you when I haven’t made a decision, but I’m going crazy. I can’t figure out for the life of me if my brother – or my sister – is a boy or a girl. This is ridiculous, and it’s driving me up the wall. My neighbours all have memory issues, but this takes the cake. Can you just tell me? I figure you’d know.’”

My thoughts swam, and I couldn’t contain my laughter, nor my rapidly beating heart, nor the anxiety. What I said was, “That does sound like her.”

“I told her, ‘If you’d like to know, why don’t you visit to find out?’ She made an exasperated noise, and went about her daily business.”

“That also sounds like her. And thanks for trying.”

“When she had time to think in between her paperwork, she did, and then she called upon me again and agreed.”

I stood stunned. “She did?”

“She did.”

“So when...”

“Tomorrow.”

I let the word linger in the air. “Tomorrow, huh.”

“It’s time I met your difficult sibling.” His voice was light. “You put up with Vivec, after all, and he’s the easy one. I probably owe you.”

And the rest can be figured out somehow. The predicted future is gone. The newly existing Nerevar is already making changes without even knowing a thing. Not the changes you’d expect, but unexpected is good. Unexpected is what gets things done in the end.

Keeping things light is for once not a way to keep going; it’s appropriate.

I went through a possible list of responses, but then settled on a simple “Thank you.”

Sil leaned against me. “We should not mention this dragon break business anymore outside of very secure spaces. We will need an excuse to give Miziah, too, for what she experienced; she’ll expect knowledge from us. But while we’re here... I will say that it was a very good idea.”

I ran my fingers through his hair. “It was.”

For a while, he rested against me comfortably, and I held him, trapped in the usual enchantment. A good way to spend time in the most secure room in Clockwork City.

Then he shifted to look at me, a glint in his eyes. “Are you going to take back your criticism of Apostle scripture? After all, it was right. The part you quoted at me back then. ‘Only in sundering can things be made whole’, and so on.”

I let my hands wander down his back, hoping I’d get the rest assembled in my head. I did. “‘Only the disassembled engine can be scrubbed and made clean. So, smash the old machines! Topple your mind’s idols! And from the wreckage, assemble new truths—flawless and water-tight.’ You do know that’s terribly Padomaic logic, don’t you?”

“I didn’t write these.” A smile.

“I know,” I said, “you almost always make sense. The scripture rarely does. Could be worse. Could have had Vivec write it.”

He actually laughed at that. “We let him do what he wanted, on his insistence that he is the poet. We both came to regret it, but by then it was too late. We really should have known better. The things he finds poetic...” He shook his head.

I grinned. “You should have *me* write your scripture instead.”

“Scripture written by a heretic. Most Apostles would find it in keeping with my statements and idiosyncrasies, and some of them would attempt to find a deep meaning and a challenge in there.”

“And then there’d be more machine metaphors.”

“Always.”

I pet his ear, and he leaned into the touch. “At least you can be assured there’d be no dreugh babies involved.”

Sil let out a deep sigh. “As I said. My sister and I came to deeply regret that course of events. If there has ever been a practical lesson on the consequences of inaction, you see it there.”

Too cute. I lightly bit his ear, and his hand wandered into my hair, grabbing hold of it.

“It is unfortunate,” he continued, “that a representative of the Shivering Isles could be trusted to produce saner scripture than my brother.”

“Well, let me know when you need to make a statement.”

His arm snaked around my waist, and he pulled me closer. “You, as such, are statement enough. Let’s hold off on the scripture for now.”

“You say ‘for now,’” I couldn’t resist pointing out.

He didn’t qualify that statement any further.

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